

With my being out last week, and with next Sunday's Palm Sunday readings of the passion week with no sermon, I flexed a bit to take part of the Gospel for next Sunday to preach on today. It sets the stage for the passion week, and in it, as was the custom of Jesus, we see him teaching about God, ourselves, and the world.

During seminary, I worked as a preloader for UPS. I stood at the back of a truck next to a long conveyor belt, pulling off the packages that belonged in my truck. The UPS center was an austere building of concrete and metal with the slightly dusty smell of pasteboard.

It was not offensive, wasn't like working in a barn or confinement building mind you, but there was nothing faintly interesting. It so happened that there was a certain supervisor, who was a woman, and who did not spare the perfume when she got ready in the morning.

I'm not enough of a connoisseur to know if it was cheap or expensive perfume, I just know that whenever she came by to see how things were going, it made the truck smell delightful for a while.

It always reminded me of this story, and what it might have been like to smell something wonderful in a dry, dusty, place. Furthermore, in first c. Palestine, it's quite likely that the town had much worse smells. In fact, due to the reality of open sewers and no running water, it's very likely that there were very offensive odors abounding, not unlike, say, a campground outhouse

If a heavily perfumed woman could make a UPS truck fragrant, this unnamed woman's use of perfume transformed the whole house and probably an area around the house as well! This was nard, and it was likely imported from India and it was probably worth one year's wages. A denari was roughly one day's wage, so 300 would be close to a year. It was probably about 12 ounces, the size of a can of pop, and intensely fragrant.

Most likely something that valuable would have been a family heirloom, perhaps passed from one generation to another. Typically people would have used a few drops, and then only for special occasions. 12 ounces of such valuable and pungent perfume must have been very nearly overpowering.

So imagine if you saw someone pour out anything valued at a year's salary all at once. My guess is that you would catch your breath, stunned at what you just witnessed. And there, in a moment, it is all gone— used up to the last drop when the woman pours out this powerful oil over both Jesus' head,

And perhaps just as stunning, Jesus commends her for it. Her not-so-token appreciation and affection for Jesus, as she readies him for his burial, will be remembered, as Jesus says, whenever this gospel, whenever this good news, is told. And so it is even this morning.

The woman's act devotion here in Mark, clearly anticipates Jesus death. She is honoring Jesus, and Jesus, clearly IS honored.

The anointing of one's head normally denotes an official declaration of kingly or priestly status, but Jesus interprets the action quite differently:

He says that she is doing this in anticipation of his burial.

Nard, was a burial perfume, as was Myrrh, one of the Magi's gifts to the baby Jesus (gold, frankincense, and MYRRH). It was used as a type of embalming, to cover the stench of a decomposing body.

We don't know if the woman knew that Jesus's death and burial were looming, or, if she was just expressing her passionate devotion.

And then, in the vein of “no good deed goes unpunished,” some who witnessed this incredibly generous act of devotion and worship start doing some math.

“Skeptics math” you might call it . . .

“you know, this ointment could have brought a pretty penny on the market, and sold for a year's worth of wages. Just think how much that would have been to help the poor!”

But Jesus comes to the aid of the woman:

“listen up, oh short-sighted people. Leave her alone! She had done a good thing for me! You want to help the poor? Guess what, you still can! I'm only here but a little while longer. Time is short to honor me. But there is plenty of time, and plenty of poor, that can use your help.”

A version of this story occurs in all four gospels with some differences. Matthew and John follow Luke here and quote Jesus saying a line that maybe you have heard, “**The poor you will always have with you.**” Are you familiar with this line? It sounds a bit cavalier, almost uncaring. Almost a sort of resigned sense of “oh well, what are you going to do?”

We know how that is, right? Whenever we pass someone panhandling, maybe we give a few bucks, maybe we don't. But we see in 2024 that there are poor, and they are with us.

It may be surprising to learn that Jesus is not being original here when he talks about the poor being with us. In fact, he's quoting Deuteronomy 15.

Deuteronomy, as you recall, is a recounting of Israel's history as they are amassed at the border, about to enter the promised land. They have been wandering for 40 years, now they are on the cusp of the promised land.

And in chapter 15, we find Moses's teaching about the poor. Listen to what Moses says.

1 *At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.*

2 *This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the Lord's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.*

3 *You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you.*

4 *However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you,*

...

7 *If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother.*

8 *Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.*

10 *Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.*

11 *There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.*

Two phrases in particular echo in a verbatim way the words of Jesus. Verse 4: ***there should be no poor among you***, and verse 11: ***There will always be poor people in the land***.

Why should there not be any poor among biblical Israel? Simply put, ***because God provides enough***. God has sufficiently blessed Israel with the promised land, a land of milk and honey, and there is sufficient for all of Israel and any strangers in the land as well. If someone is in need, according to God it is because there is an improper distribution of goods in the land.

So while Jesus commends the woman's costly act of devotion, he doesn't set aside the command to care for the poor. "you can show kindness to them whenever you wish." And you should always want to show kindness, because ***there should be no poor among you***.

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And doesn't this story put its finger on two aspects of following Jesus—personal loving devotion, and doing what he tells us to do, loving our neighbor, caring for those less fortunate. . . ?

When we talked about this at Soup and Scripture this past week, a member shared the debate that took place here at AHLIC when the organ was installed. Understandably, the organ was not cheap, perhaps that money could have been used to help the poor?

But, also, music is no small part of our *worship of God*. Music and song lift our hearts and spirits and enkindle in us our devotion to Jesus. That's why we gather once a week, to worship,

like the woman with the expensive ointment,

so that we remember what God has done for us,

so that we can live lives of gratitude,

and enter the world to do the work Jesus clearly commands us to do.

Heart-felt **worship**,

and **work** for the kingdom of God.

Two sides of the coin of following Jesus.

Let us continue now this morning with worship in song and praise,
and with bread and wine,

And let us go into the world this week,
with gratitude for the work of Christ,
to save us from ourselves,

And may our work be a perfume in the world,
Overcoming despair and destruction,
With the fragrance of love and devotion,
To our suffering savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.