

“LOYALTY AND BETRAYAL.”

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First Christian Reformed Church
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Scripture Texts: Mark 14:1-11

Introduction.

I apologize for any whiplash you may be feeling going from Christmas straight to holy week and Passover. As we resume the Gospel of Mark this morning we are in the last days of Jesus' earthly ministry. Lord willing we will conclude Mark with the resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Chapter 14 of Mark begins the description of Jesus' suffering, His abandonment, betrayal and arrest. The tide turns in this chapter, He's opposed by everyone, the Pharisees, the chief priests and elders, even His own disciples, from Judas to Peter. By the time we get to the cross Jesus will die utterly alone.

Mark 14:1-2, The leaders plot against Jesus.

It was the time of the Passover and the weeklong Feast of the Unleavened Bread. This was the largest celebration of the year for the Jews. Jerusalem was the only place the Passover could be celebrated. The population of Jerusalem swelled from fifty thousand to between two hundred and fifty thousand and two or three million.

Our text *begins* with the chief priests and scribes looking for a way to arrest and kill Jesus secretly. Our text *ends* when their search is over and Judas comes to betray Jesus to them.

These two short texts serve as another Mark sandwich, bookends around the beautiful story of Jesus' anointing. Two slices of betrayal around a big display of loyalty.

Caiaphas and those with him think they are acting on their own, they think they are plotting in secret, by guile and deception, but their every thought and every evil intention are completely known to God and directed by God. What they meant for evil, God would mean for good.

The enemies of Jesus did not want His death to be public. Their original plan was to do this in secret without anyone knowing. But the death of Jesus took place in the most public way possible and on the day when the most number of people possible were in Jerusalem.

Note well that the overarching providence of God completely controls all political ambitions, all human plans, all evil intentions. Let this comfort your hearts and minds as listen to the news and read your newspapers this year.

God has everything in His hands and it all works for His glory and the glory of His Son and the glory of His Son's Church.

Psalm 2:1-2, 4 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed, ...

4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.

Mark 14:3-9, a woman anoints the Lord.

While they plot Jesus is across the Kidron valley on the east side of the Mount of Olives in the small village of Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper possibly the father of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. This anonymous woman is identified as Mary in John's Gospel.

With no explanation a woman comes up to Jesus, breaks open an expensive alabaster jar of very rare and costly perfume made of pure nard and pours it over Jesus' head. This was clearly an over the top, extravagant gesture.

Nard or spikenard is a flowering plant that grows in northern India and the Himalayas and is used to make a very fragrant oil used for perfume. We are told it was worth more than 300 denarii or 300 days wages which, if you exclude Sabbaths, makes it a year's salary.

I looked up the most expensive perfumes today. I can't even pronounce many of the fancy names. The most expensive is Chive Christian at \$12,700 an ounce and it comes in a bottle with a diamond on it.

How Mary could be in possession of such an expensive gift is unknown. One possibility is that it was a family heirloom. She breaks the jar so it can never be used again and empties the contents so they can never be used again underscoring the totality of the gift, a huge sacrifice.

The disciples rebuke the woman: The danger of a quick tongue.

In Mark's gospel the critics are not named, Matthew tells us it was the disciples (Matt 26:8) and John specifically says it was Judas (John 12:4-5). I suspect Judas may have spoken first and the rest chimed in in agreement.

The language is strong. They were indignant, criticizing her actions as a waste. They demeaned the woman and her gift, but failed to realize that they demeaned Jesus as well, as if to say He was an unworthy recipient of such extravagance.

A year's salary was wasted by dumping it on Jesus' head. Would you be more ashamed of such an extravagant waste or of thinking it was an extravagant waste?

The disciples do what we often do, judge by outward appearances without knowing true motives or intentions. If the disciples could be caught in Judas' words, how quickly and easily would it be for one of us to be hooked by a little piece of gossip? How easy is it to call good evil and evil good?

It's a strange irony that a person can have a great passion for sports or a hobby or politics or business success and not be criticized. But if he has a great passion for spiritual things he is a fanatic or an extremist.

If we truly understand the sinfulness of sin and the lavish mercy of Jesus, will we not go to some excesses or extremes for the one who did so much for us? Shouldn't all of us at least be accused once in a while of being a bit out there on the edge for Jesus?

Don't get blinded by the material value of her gift, that's not the main point. Remember when Jesus commended another woman for giving to very small copper coins. When we give out of a motive and intention to serve or bless, the action is never wasted no matter how great or small.

Mary was showing her great love and gratitude for Jesus and all He had done for her. She did the best thing she could think to do and Jesus called it beautiful. Imagine Mary's own shock to hear Jesus' response that she had done more than even she imagined, she had anointed Him for burial.

Then Jesus says yet another shocking thing. He memorializes her gift. He says that for the rest of human history, whenever the Gospel is proclaimed and this text preached, her story will be told and her gift honored.

Jesus rebukes the disciples.

Jesus rebukes His own disciples by saying that the action they condemned will be praised by all races of men all over the world for all time.

Why would Jesus praise what she has done? If Jesus' life on earth was characterized by anything it was characterized by frugality. He owned nothing, He had to ask for a coin to make a point. He had no place to lay His head. So why does He praise this luxurious over indulgence?

This is not a call to a life style of luxury and extravagance. This is a call to be open to the Holy Spirit and to when He might prompt you to do something beyond what you would normally do.

She was moved by the Holy Spirit to do something extraordinary. I think of another Mary who was told she would give birth to the Son of God, and she said, "May be to unto me as you have said."

Mary did a good work unto the Lord and He was pleased and commended her. That is enough, we need seek no further justification and no further praise.

Yes, people talked, yes, people criticized. That's how it always is. You do something that's right, that honors God, that is a good work pleasing to God and others will criticize. They will call you a goody-two-shoes, one of those holier-than-thou people, a religious fanatic.

Remember that often what men condemn, God approves. A life devoted to the Lord may not gain you much in the world's eyes, but the world's eyes aren't the only judge.

The world doesn't understand that "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

Rest in the truth that where your treasure is there will your heart be also. So let your treasure be in heaven.

Mark 14:10-11, Judas betrays the Lord.

Mark tells this story in a way to heighten the scandalous nature of Judas' betrayal.

Judas was part of Jesus' inner circle, he was one of the Twelve. He was chosen by Jesus; he was a constant companion of the Messiah; he was an eye-witness to the most incredible miracles and an ear-witness to the most incredible truths ever proclaimed; he even preached and did miracles himself.

He saw and heard and experienced all the evidence. How could he turn away? Never was there such a great fall as this.

What a contrast. From the greatest act of charity and loyalty to the greatest act of greed and betrayal. An unnamed outsider shows devotion, while a named insider shows betrayal.

Greed seems to be the motive. He grew into it as he stole a little here and a little there from the money bag. Perhaps the bag was especially low as Mary wasted that perfume on Jesus. Did this extravagant display of generosity drive a greedy Judas over the edge? The old saying, follow the money, applies here. If you want to know the source of evil just find out who would profit financially. Judas was the one to profit financially in this betrayal.

I Timothy 4:10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Beware of the love of money. It's a power so great it can turn you away from all you have seen and heard and believed. Beware of covetousness, it's a cancer that will eat your soul.

The love of money was the death of Balaam and Gehazi (II Kings 5:20-27) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

Judas was pleased to take thirty pieces of silver, but the pleasure was deceitful, as are all sinful pleasures. Ask Judas now what he thinks of the bargain he made.

Learn contentment, to want no more than what you have. And learn to give thanks not just for what you have but for what you don't have. You don't know what dangers the Lord has spared you from by not giving you more.

We should all have some fear of being as rich as we are, some sober fear of the dangers of being so materially blessed.

Application and conclusion.

What was Mary's gift a reflection of? Didn't God give us the best and greatest gift in His Son and hasn't God continued to pour out His extravagant love on us in grace after grace. Doesn't God delight in showing us His favor? Our God is a lavish God, a God who overdoes it. Heaven isn't going to look like a budget hotel with a cheap little continental breakfast. Heaven is going to make the Ritz Carlton look like Motel Six.

I think what Mary did is hard for us to grasp and hard for us to think about and talk about. My general disposition is to not spend too much, to try to hold back, to save, to keep money in the bank. And I can easily justify it with words like good stewardship, staying under budget, saving for the future, being careful, prudent and wise.

Would I ever do something over-the-top extravagant and excessive for Jesus? Would I ever do something from a pure heart and motive that others would criticize as wasteful?

I find this text challenging and upsetting to my carefully built categories.

When I look back over my life I see that God has richly and generously blessed me far beyond all I could ask or imagine and certainly way beyond anything I deserve. And when I consider all my sin against Him again and again and again, and yet He is still lavish in His forgiveness and His grace and kindness, it's staggering. There is nothing about God's ways toward me that suggests under-giving or selfishness or cutting corners or doing just the bare minimum.

When God dispenses His love and grace and blessings, how does He do it? With an eye-dropper or a thimble? No, He does it with a front end loader and a double dump truck. There is nothing miserly about God. When Jesus fed the five thousand He had a whole bunch left over.

How do we justify our ways toward each other and our ways toward God when we consider His ways toward us?

I am ashamed of my lack of generosity, of my tight fistedness, of my self-righteousness attitude about how good I am at handling money and keeping track of every penny and always thinking about the future.

Why do we live in fear of our finances when we have a God like the one we have?

Sure, I know generosity can be done sinfully and that good stewardship is a good thing. Yes, there is a ditch on the other side of the road. But Jesus didn't say that Mary went off into the ditch. He commended her and then went beyond that and said that what she did was a reflection of the Gospel, a Gospel like thing, and it would be preached and proclaimed and commended for the rest of human history.

I am troubled by this. Would I have been with the disciples in this story?

When we love and serve our Lord is it ever in a way that would invite the criticism of others as too much or over the top or extravagant? Do we model or encourage our children to go above and beyond for Jesus? Why do we always think that total moderation is the only virtue?

Do we ever begrudge or judge another person's service of God or their church; or try to tear down someone's sacrifice to build ourselves up?

Do we look for ways to do good works, to show love and honor to Jesus, who He is and what He has done for us?

Is there something we can do this week that is beautiful for the Lord? In a dark and evil time, can we add some beauty? Something that looks like the way God is?

Now let me encourage you in some of the small things and some of the beautiful things many of you are already doing that some people think are crazy.

You maintain a devotion of worship on Sundays, not spending the day the way the world does. You give a portion of your income to the Lord and His work, not spending it all on yourself. You give a portion of your time to serve the Lord and your church and others. Some of you serve our little ones in the nursery or in countless other acts.

And on that great last day, may Jesus defend our works and plead our case with the Father. The praise of our Savior will more than compensate for all that we suffer in this life.