

The Scent of the Savior

Mark 14:1-11

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My grandma smoked cigarettes. A lot. And if she were here today, she would probably deny such claims until her face turned blue. You see by the time my siblings and I came around; my grandma had tried to quit smoking to no avail several times, and by the time we were children she did not want my siblings and I to even know she smoked. To keep her habit a secret Grandma would often “go check the mail” when we stayed at her house. When I was little, I never thought anything of it, except for the fact that my grandma must’ve been really excited for the mail to get here. When Grandma came back inside from her mailbox excursion, she would always smell so strongly of this very specific floral perfume, Youth Dew by Estee Lauder to be exact. My mom would always complain that Grandma’s perfume gave her headaches because she wore too much of it. However, to me as a kid, it just smelled like Grandma. It wasn’t until I was much older that I realized Grandma would spray so much perfume because she was covering the scent of cigarettes.

When my grandma died in December 2020, it was after a long journey with Alzheimer’s. Grandma began living with my family in 2015, and in a lot of ways those five years were spent preparing for her death. We watched as slowly the woman who was President of the Arkansas Parent Teachers Association, who knew the Bible and her Baptist hymns by heart, and who could make a MEAN cornbread dressing and chocolate gravy slipped away. In the mental health world this is called anticipatory grief, where over the course of a chronic illness you grieve the death before it has even happened. However, no matter how much grieving we did beforehand, it was still an unimaginable pain to know that I would never again smell my grandma’s specific scent of cigarettes and youth dew.

Here in the United States, we do not handle grief well. In her book *It’s Okay to Laugh (Crying is Cool Too)*, Nora McInerny talks about how when she was widowed at the age of 31, she was given three days for bereavement with her job in marketing. Three days. Three days to grapple with how her world had been irrevocably altered, three days to learn how to be a single mother, three days to mourn the loss of the love of her life. We do not handle grief well in this country.

Ancient Rome also did not handle grief well. The mortality rate in ancient Rome was quite high. Death was so commonplace that it would have been considered taboo to even hold a funeral for someone under the age of 10. Because death was so incredibly common, these people were desensitized to death in a lot of ways, and probably did not do well in caring for one another in the face of loss.

That brings us to our gospel message for today, and I'm going to be completely honest: I struggle with this story because I agree with those who scolded the woman. This perfume that she poured over Jesus' head cost 300 denarii, which in the context of the ancient world would have been a year's worth of wages for a rural day laborer.¹ I think by now, we all know how passionately I feel about our calling as Christians to care for the poor and marginalized, so to read this passage that in so many ways feels antithetical to the vast majority of Jesus' teachings feels wrong. However, by now in Jesus' ministry, he has obviously done well in teaching the disciples about caring for the poor because that is what they notice. Now, however, the time has come where Jesus must teach them something new about grief and love.

You see this story of the anointing of Jesus is situated in what we call a Markan Intercalation or more colloquially, a Markan Sandwich. The author of the gospel of Mark would often use this literary technique in which he begins to tell a story, interrupts it with another, related story, then come back to the original story. verses 1-2 as the first slice of bread in the sandwich, where we are once again reminded of the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities that began in the 2nd chapter of Mark. As the Passover began, the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest and kill Jesus without inciting a riot. Then, Mark's telling of the religious authorities' schemes is interrupted by the meat and veggies of the sandwich: the anointing of Jesus at Bethany. Following the story of the anointing and Jesus' teaching, the gospel writer of Mark picks back up with the last slice of bread: the plot to kill Jesus by informing us of Judas' betrayal. By situating this anointing within the plot to kill Jesus, the author is imploring us to hear this story considering Jesus' impending death.

In the story of the anointing itself, Jesus responds to the woman's act by saying "She has performed a good service for me." However, the word we translate as good is Kalos, and it had a much deeper meaning. The word Kalos can mean good as in morally right or beautiful as in aesthetically pleasing. But, biblical scholar Lamar Williamson point out that "in the present context, it means more than either of the above. . . To give to the poor is right (v. 7), but the woman's deed is of a different order of rightness. To anoint the head with perfume is aesthetically pleasing, but the woman's act is of a higher order of beauty. What she does is admirable because it is timely. The beauty of her extravagant and apparently wasteful gesture is due to the particular situation: Jesus is about to die."²

¹ Lamar Williamson Jr. Mark : Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

² Williamson, Interpretation.

You see, this woman is creating a space in which Jesus and his followers could grieve what is yet to come, an opportunity that would not be granted them once Jesus was killed on the cross. Obviously, we are to care for the poor, but this passage is about more than that. This passage is about care for community in the face of immense loss and pain.

The woman's actions is made even more meaningful with Jesus' next statement about her: "She has done what she could." I'm going to be honest, in preparing for this sermon, I went down a bit of a rabbit hole on ancient perfume uses and practices, and I learned some very interesting things. We are told in this passage that the woman anoints Jesus with "an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard." Some extrabiblical texts mention that "nard and saffron scents were used by women as perfumes" at this time.³ However, what's unique about this that we are told "she broke open the jar." Now originally, I was imagining this to be a clay pot busting situation but, in my research, I learned that it was probably meant that she broke the seal of the jar. This perfume was unopened. Now, I want us to time travel for a second back to first century Rome. If you're a woman, good luck. Because women had no way of surviving without the support of a man. A woman had no way of making her own money. A woman was entirely dependent for her survival. However, a woman could have things, so if a woman had in her possession a bottle of perfume that was worth a year's wages, she had in possession safety and security. Forget about the thought of the poor for a second, and consider that if this woman were to ever find herself in a position without support or a position where she had to flee, she could have sold that bottle of perfume and survived. This bottle was her only secure means. Therefore, in anointing Jesus She is not merely giving away the opportunity to smell nice. She is giving of herself completely. This woman's act of anointing Jesus, honoring his life and his work is extremely costly to her and Jesus acknowledges that. By saying "she has done what she could," Jesus recognizes that "what she had, she gave; or what she had it in her power to do, she did. Her act is beautiful because she has invested herself in it. She gave what she had to him who was about to give his life for her."⁴

One thing my therapist has told me is that the pain we feel when grieving someone is a sign of just how much we loved that person. This woman's actions are not tied with her perception of what is pious; her anointing of Jesus was done from a stance of uncalculating love. Williamson continues in his commentary on this passage to point out that the woman's "deed springs from a personal love for Jesus which, on occasion, breaks all patterns, defies common sense, and simply gives. Spontaneous, uncalculating, selfless,

³ Edwin M. Yamauchi, and Marvin R. Wilson. Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity : Complete in One Volume, A-Z. Hendrickson Academic, 2017.

⁴ Lamar, Interpretation.

and timely, her gift calls us to love Jesus in this way too and not to judge the way others express their love for him.”⁵

It was not unusual for costly perfumes to be used in burial rites at this point in time. I imagine that when the woman broke the seal of the perfume and carefully and lovingly poured the bottle of perfume over Jesus’ head the strong scent of nard would have filled the room they were in. The scent would have crept over the space and everyone in Simon’s house would have known what was going on. Since mortality rates were so high in ancient Rome, they probably would have been very familiar with the scent as it probably was a sign of death to them. And it was probably scary for them. The fact that this scent that represented loss, death, grief, and despair was covering their teacher and friend, the one they called Messiah. But the women’s actions allow the disciples to begin to face that pain with Jesus.

In the face of the destructive force of death, the woman gives of herself completely with uncalculating love, knowing that it will be painful and hard and complicated. But she does it, out of love for Jesus and care for community, and we are meant to do the same. As people of God, our calling is to care for our community with our whole selves. Not just the people in here or the people in your building or your neighborhood, but the world. The scent of the Savior is not simply the smell of an expensive perfume. We know the presence of God by the presence of love. Whether that is freshly baked bread for Communion, expensive perfume, or a mixture of youth dew and cigarettes. We know God’s love in this world by the things that bring love and push us to better care for our communities. So I encourage you to look for the ways you may find the scent of the savior in ways you would least expect them. Amen.

⁵ Lamar, Interpretation.