

"Pleasure vs. Authority vs. Death"

Message of the Day, March 22, 2020

by Pastor Dave Denoon

The gospels of Mark and Matthew provide an account of that act of the unnamed woman. The disciples, uncomfortable with such an extravagance, objected.

Later retellings of the story would claim that the woman was Mary of Bethany, as in the gospel according to John. Luke would identify her as a sinner whose sin was not named but apparently was well known to the others at the table. She washed Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped the moisture away with her hair, and anointed them. And the association would grow with her and Mary Magdalene who is introduced immediately afterward by Luke.

"The woman with the alabaster flask" is someone whose story can create unease. This may be because she performs an act so intimate it's off-putting.

In each case – Matthew's, Mark's, Luke's, and John's – the woman is scolded or disrespected by someone at the table. The host of the meal objects in Luke, Judas Iscariot in John, and – as I already noted – the disciples in Matthew and Mark.

But there's another facet to this. Jesus bears the title "Christ" so historically that people sometimes mistake it for his last name. Christ, however, is a Greek translation of the word *Meshiach* (Messiah) in Hebrew or Aramaic. In English, we would use the phrase, "anointed one." And anointing is what this woman does to Jesus.

Put in the hands of someone with authority, anointing is what indicates someone's royal majesty. In addition to rulers, priests in ancient Hebrew tradition were anointed. And you may even have seen me anoint people who are baptized or confirmed in the faith. Anointing is symbolic of God's Spirit resting on a person. According to prophecy, the Messiah would be the person who restored David's royal line to the throne of Israel.

Yehoshua Meshiach. Jesus the Messiah. Jesus Christ.

But in the gospels, the word used for what happens to Jesus at dinner on Wednesday is not the same as that which is used for anointing rulers. This anointing indicates not simple pouring but applying. It is an act of gentle kindness, performed on someone who is stressed or being bathed. *That appearance of the anointing* is what made the disciples so uncomfortable. They complained of extravagance and waste.

Did they suppose that Jesus ought to have objected at the extravagance? They wouldn't be alone in our tradition, you know.

Historically, our spiritual ancestors have objected to such displays of affection.

In fact, ask yourself, how you might feel if you saw someone who is supposed to be humble or holy – the Dalai Lama, say, or the Pope – accept such an offering? (Not that any of us would get an invitation to such a dinner, but still...)

But Jesus did not object. What he did was to say that the action did not mean what they thought it meant. He may have been saying, in fact, that it didn't mean what the woman thought it meant. "She has performed a kindness for me," he said. "She has anointed me beforehand for my burial."

That's some surprising language. As this act is performed which appears to be, maybe, a coronation. Or, as it's perceived, it's an extravagant kindness. Is it pleasure?

Or maybe it's authority being granted. But what authority does this woman have that would make it possible for her to anoint a regent, a Messiah?

Jesus bring us back to the reality of his passion. He reminds us, as he reminded them, of the reason Holy Week happened. There would be suffering and death, and it would happen suddenly and speedily. There would not be time – because of the holiday – to attend to all the necessities of a proper burial.

There is a group of women in Christian history referred to as "the myrrh bearers" – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome, and Mary the mother of James. There were others there, unnamed, according to Luke. These are the ones who went to the tomb on the morning of the resurrection. They took with them ointments and spices for the rightful preparation of the body of the dead Jesus. But when they arrived, the tomb was open, and the body was missing.

They were terrified, Mark says. And one can imagine that this had as much to do with their inability to prepare the body as it did the appearance of a grave robbery.

But his body had been prepared beforehand. His body had been prepared beforehand.

So, lacking their expected role, this group would be the ones who would herald Jesus' resurrection to the other disciples.

And that is a profound role for them, especially given the way that women have been treated by the church and its wider society and cultures.

Through centuries and millennia, the place and role of women in the church has been challenged pretty consistently. And the choice by church authorities to do this has been grossly problematic, especially considering the prominence that the women around Jesus enjoyed.

They may not have been among the twelve disciples, who were all men. But there was a bunch of symbolism going on about those men – emulating the sons and grandsons of Jacob for whom the twelve tribes were named. But, remember, Jacob also had daughters. And even though he and his wives would have loved their daughters just as much as their sons, those daughters are memorable for their mistreatment and the dismissive way in which they were treated.

In fact, speaking of dismissiveness, so often women don't even have names in our tradition. Who knows the names of Noah's wife or Lot's or Job's? Yet these women were crucial to the lore in which their stories are found.

Jesus touched women, traveled with women, received reproof from them, and even made one of them – Mary Magdalene – his original apostle. How dare we have spent so many centuries deriding and dismissing them!

He clearly was establishing a new spiritual order.

And we men in the church decided, rather than take the risk that he did of recognizing the equality of women, instead to forget that his grace is given equally. Thus, until only a few generations ago, we Americans ignored their equal status as citizens, and really only until a few *decades ago* we mainline Christians have ignored women's right to equal status as leaders in the church.

How dare we have done this?

The gifts that women bring to spiritual caregiving and prophecy were set aside for far too long. How could we survive times such as this without women to lead us, to remind us that feeling small or powerless does not mean that we will be crushed, that strength, real spiritual strength, is rooted in us, growing out from us. We with Mary of Nazareth are God-bearers; with Mary Magdalene and the others we are myrrh-bearers.

Let's face it, men don't convey that message very well. We can repeat God's admonition, "Be not afraid" or the promise, "I am with you," but we have had our own societal strength and social privilege to protect us. And, besides, that same power that has enabled us to face the struggles of this

world with confidence is the power that has created stratified society, racism, classism, discrimination, and xenophobia.

It was time to end that kind of power in Jesus' day. "You must be like children," he said. "Those who would be exalted must humble themselves." "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." Pretty clearly, he knew something that is only beginning to dawn on us as a religion, as a species.

And it began with a woman with an alabaster flask full of perfume, doing our Savior a kindness – not giving him pleasure, though that's how it was perceived. Not crowning him king, although he rules our hearts. But anointing him beforehand for his burial, so that we might understand truly why he came among us and dwelt here so briefly, full of love and glory, full of grace and truth.

Amen.