

Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

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Palm Sunday/The Sunday of the Passion

March 25 2018

“It Was All for You”

Text: Mark 14:3

“And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.”

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).

I don't know how I missed her before! Before, and *before*, and *before*! Like maybe - what would it be by now? we have this Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion gospel from St. Mark every *three* years, so over the last two and a half decades that's? - *eight*, possibly even *nine times*?

Oh, not that I'm in the habit of noticing other women. But *this* one should have stood *out*. *This* one should have caught my attention. She really went out of her way. She really outdid herself. She threw caution completely to the wind. She walked right into the lion's den. She invaded what was surely a “Guys Only” club. She risked being roundly criticized. She braved being completely misunderstood. In all honesty, she risked being tossed out on her feminine ear - and in a not-at-all-ladylike fashion!

Like I say, I don't know how I missed her before!

For as if all *that* weren't enough, of course there's *this too* - or, more appropriately, there's *this* in the *first* place - that Mark thought enough to include her. Mark, who doesn't include *anything* that isn't important. (*You* remember what we call Mark - Mr. Gospel-in-a-hurry.) Mark, who doesn't include any of the other guys' Palm Sunday pageantry - the “*I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out*” (Lk. 19:40) or the “*Look, the whole world has gone after him*” (Jn. 12:19b) or the “*This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, ‘Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a don-key, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden’*” (Mt. 21:4-5) - and yet somehow has time for *this* woman?

So what does *that* tell you?

It tells *me*, like I've already said *twice*, I don't know how I missed her before. It tells me I should have seen her. It tells me I sure better be sure to see her *now*. It tells me she's *important*. It tells me she's got something important to *say*. And that's quite the accomplishment for a woman who doesn't say a thing. And that's rather remarkable for a woman whose name we aren't even given here.

So let's go back and look again. Or, if we're going to be honest, perhaps, let's go back and look for the *first* time.

Now, in our defense, it all happens rather quickly, doesn't it? But then, this is *Mark*, where *everything* seems to happen quickly. Jesus is in Bethany, his home base during his Jerusalem ministry. As He often is in Mark, He's in a house. Simon's house. Simon, who is referred to simply as “*the leper*.”

Some “handles” *stick, don't* they? You can't shake them. No matter what you do.

“*The house of Simon the leper.*”

Now we can be pretty sure that no *leper* could afford to own his own house. In fact, we can be pretty sure that no leper would be allowed even to *live* in a house. The neigh-

borhood *CC&R*'s would have prohibited *that!* So we've got to be thinking that Simon *once* was a leper - that sometime in the past he had had the disease - but that he must have been healed by Jesus, so that now, if he's not a disciple, at least he's a friend.

Still, "*the leper,*" right? Mr. Mark still refers to Simon as "*the leper.*" *Maybe* that's because *everybody* still referred to the guy as "*the leper.*" Some nicknames you never *do* grow out of. Or *maybe* that's because Mark, who told us in his *opening line* that he was setting down "*the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" (Mk. 1:1), wanted us to be reminded about what he had told us back at the beginning, about what *Jesus* had told us, about what Jesus had told the scribes who were so upset when they saw that He was eating with sinners and tax collectors:

"*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners*" (Mk. 2:16-17).

". . . *While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table*" - while he was *eating*, that is - "*a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.*"

Now I don't know when the last time *you* bought perfume was, but this was the good stuff. *So* good, it might well have been a family heirloom, something that had been passed down from generation to generation, from mother to daughter. The "*bottle*" tells you that - the container, literally this "*thing of alabaster*" (taugh alla-bas-TRAWN) (το αλαβαστρον). And so does what was *inside*, the "*ointment of pure nard.*" This one hadn't been "cut." It was full strength. It was genuine. It was pure - pure aromatic oil extracted from the stem of a plant that may well have come all the way from India, for that was where the very *best* nard was grown.

And it was *expensive*. It was, Mark writes, "*very*

costly." And if you ask me, Mark, who doesn't waste any words, used just the right ones here: *Costly. Very costly.*

Only how did I miss it *before?* Before and *before* and *before?*

Those at the *banquet* that night sure didn't miss it.

But then again, it was hard to miss. A woman walks right into the middle of a private celebration, marches right up to the guest of honor, pulls out a fancy flask of semitransparent stone, cracks the long neck right off it, and dumps the entire contents onto Jesus' head!

The outcry was immediate! It was as if a *second* flask had been broken open, and *its* equally-odoriferous bouquet likewise began to spread. Only this *second* one was hardly *sweet-smelling*; it was petty and critical and stingy and foul.

4 *There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii"* - almost a *year's* wages - "*and given to the poor.*"

"*And they scolded her.*" That's the *critical* part!

Now either this woman was brave enough not just to "cut and run," or she was frozen in place by the way everyone else at the table suddenly all turned from their food and began devouring *her*, or . . . well, . . . or maybe her work there wasn't yet done.

And clearly that work was to be just the *foil* that Jesus needed. To teach all the rest of them a lesson, I mean. To teach all the rest of them *the* lesson, I think it's safe to say on this double day that we call Palm Sunday *and* the Sunday of the Passion.

The lesson. *The* meaning. The meaning of what she's just done. The meaning - as we considered *last* week - of what Jesus had been trying to get through to His first followers: "I'm gonna die!"

Oh, not before He had shamed them for not being able to see the big picture, not before He had exposed them for

being small and petty and stingy:

6 *But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, . . .*

Not that there was anything wrong with helping out the poor, of course. That wasn't at all the point. No, far from having done something that deserved to be *criticized*, this woman had done a *good* thing, an *excellent* thing, even. Far from having done something *inappropriate*, this woman had done something that - at that moment in *time* - couldn't have been more *appropriate*, more *fitting*, more *absolutely prophetic*.

. . . *But you will not always have me,*" Jesus picked up his earlier theme. "I'm gonna die." But not only *that*, if we really want to give her all the credit that she'd due, "I'm gonna die *an outlaw* - I'm gonna die *a criminal*," for that's the only time a Jewish man would die and there would be no anointing of his body:

8 *She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial.*

How could *I* have missed it before? How could I have been - in all the *wrong* sense - Mr. Gospel-in-a-hurry, Mr. Too-busy-trying-to-get-to-the-Palm-Sunday-Sunday-of-the-Passion-celebration-that-I-passed-this-amazing-woman-and-this-amazing-thing-that-she-did-right-by?

"*Costly*," Mark described her perfume. "*Very costly*," he described her gift. But she didn't even consider the cost, did she - the cost of her action, I mean - the cost of all this criticism, the cost to her reputation and person? She just went ahead and did what she knew she needed to do. For only *she* - out of the whole bunch, apparently - understood the cost of what *He* was going to do. The cost of all the criticism. The cost to his reputation and person. The cost of his very life.

Yes, reminiscent of that poor widow that day in the

temple, whose two-mite gift represented all that she had, this woman gave her all because she understood that Jesus was about to give *His* all . . . on Calvary's dreadful cross. She gave her "*very costly*" offering because she knew that He was about to give *His*. She went ahead and anointed His head with oil.

I can't help hearing the Psalmist:

"1 *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. . . . 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows*" (Psalm 23).

Truly, this woman's cup overflowed. Truly, she recognized the cost of the service He was about to perform for her and for "*tax collectors and sinners*" just *like* her the world over by offering up His sinless life in death. And she responded to that love, she responded to that *offering*, she responded to that *gift*, with the generous gift of her own. And in so doing, she showed all of us whose heads have been anointed, whose cup overflows, how *we* should respond as Jesus' latter-day saints and disciples.

We talked about the whole "*cup*" thing *last* week - how for the prophets and the Psalmists, the cup was simply their way of referring to the fate or the future an individual had coming from the hand of the Lord. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Crucified - Christ, the Risen-from-the-dead - *our* cup is the cup of *salvation*. It's the cup of rescue from sin, death and the devil. It's the cup of life in God's kingdom. It's the cup of new and everlasting life that awaits us at our death. "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*" For, Jesus did it all - it was all - for you.

Therefore, may every one of our days be filled with our costly - our *very costly* - devotion to our Savior and Lord. May God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.