



Questions from Jesus' Last Week

"Why was the ointment wasted in this way?"

Mark 14:4 | February 18, 2018

Introduction: This week we begin our Lenten series, "Questions from Jesus' Last Week," recognizing that the questions we bring with us to Christ's passion have been a part of the story from the very beginning.

Among the chastening critiques of Malachi 1 is that of bringing spoiled or worthless offerings to God. No such challenge could be brought against this woman and her gift, a jar of pure nard. Someone in the home suggests the value of the ointment at three hundred denarii. Mark tells us that a mere two hundred denarii would have allowed the feeding of the five thousand (6:37). This means the jar of ointment could have provided a meal for 7,500 people. That little jar was no trivial gift. A gift she wastefully broke over Jesus' head.

At my ordination here at First Church, my beloved colleague, Wambugu Gachungi, poured a vial of anointing oil over my head. It ran down my head, through my hair and into my eyes, mouth, and beard. I carried the scent of that anointing for a week. In the same way, the anointing gift of this nameless woman makes its way into every gospel scene from this point forward. What do we smell as we journey with Christ in his passion?

What do you smell in the garden of Gethsemane? Pure nard. What about the courtyard of the high priest? Again, pure nard. At Pilate's inquest? At the whipping post? In the mid-day darkness of Golgotha? Amidst the brutal alienation of Christ's passion the aroma of gratitude was a constant reminder of one woman's worship. Isn't that beautiful? And why? Why this extravagant anointing? While the text doesn't tell us explicitly, some have found a hint in the host. Jesus was sitting at the table of Simon the Leper. We know from the holiness laws in Leviticus that if Simon was a leper, he should not be in the city, should not be hosting guests, and should not be in the company of anyone on the brink of holy Passover.

What if Simon was among the leprosy persons healed by Jesus? What if that healing is what gained the invitation to Jesus and his followers? And what if Simon had a wife or daughter, or other dependent who was saved from privation because of Christ's healing grace? Regardless of Simon's story, this woman wordlessly recognized that Jesus was worthy of her very best gift, and that no half-measures could express her gratitude.

Pray: Lord, Jesus Christ, it is easy to remember the WHAT of faith and forget the WHY. It's easy to slip into keeping rules and staying out of trouble and to forget to gaze upon your beauty, longing to be fashioned into your likeness. In you, Lord Jesus, the beauty of God's holiness and justice come into HD clarity. May we be compelled to set our hearts and minds upon you. Help us to set our thoughts and desires fixedly upon you, aware that we become what we behold. Renew in us a confidence that you are enough to complete by sheer grace that which you began in us by grace alone. Amen.

Read: Mark 14:3-9

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Discussion:

- 1. When the woman initially made her offering to Jesus she was met with anger (v4) and was scolded (v5).**
 - Q: Can you recall an offensively wasteful gift?
 - Q: Have you ever felt that anger or scolding turn toward a giver?
 - Q: Have you ever felt it toward you or your gift?
- 2. This woman's gift was a scandal to those around the table, yet Jesus describes it with the word 'kalos' (καλός), meaning beautiful, precious, or excellent (the ESV & NIV use 'beautiful', while the NRSV uses 'good' and still another version uses 'noble').**
 - Q: Consider the difference between 'waste' and 'beauty.' How can the perceptions in Simon's house be so conflicted?
 - Q: Consider what in our world seems wasteful. Is there a beauty hidden below the surface?
- 3. Jesus says, "...you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them (v7)."**
 - Q: What does this verse imply for servicing the poor?
 - Q: Does Jesus in this text promise perpetual poverty?
 - Q: Read Luke 4:16-21 and discuss in light of this text.
 - Q: What do you have in mind for the poor when praying for God's Kingdom to come and God's will to be done on the earth?
- 4. Jesus says of this nameless woman, "wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."**
 - Q: What is it that makes this woman worthy of being remembered "wherever the gospel is proclaimed"?
 - Q: What does this event teach us about what is worthy of memory in the eyes of Jesus?

Application: It has become common in Christian communities to "give up" something for Lent. This could be a vice, a distraction, something that is, in Paul's words, lawful but not profitable. Nothing, however, in this text implies such a quality to the woman's gift. It wasn't motivated by any pious moralism. She wasn't trying to become her best self. Instead she was seeking to give Jesus a rare and costly gift born of gratitude and love. Pray this week for the grace to be filled with gratitude and love for God's presence in your life. Pray that these would grow so that the giving of rare and costly aspects of your own life becomes natural and joyful.

Pray: Lord Jesus Christ, how is it that I have come to be in the same room as you, here in the days before your passion? I see that you are unlike other people; that you are the one who is to fulfill the covenants to Abraham and his descendants. You are special. You are unique, and in this moment I long to give you something. Give me eyes to see what in my own life is rare and costly, what I keep held back for security, what I trust in. And in seeing it, help me to gladly give it over to you. And for all the parts of me that do not want to be wholly given to you—cause those parts to see you as you are. AMEN.