

Mark 14:1-11

The Woman Anoints Jesus and Judas Plans to Betray Jesus

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*It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."*

*While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."*

*Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him. (Mark 14:1-11, NRSV)*

If we were in the sanctuary at church, I would invite the children to come join me and we would talk about part of this story. So, boys and girls, let's pretend we are sitting together on the floor. The story I just read takes place at a dinner. Jesus and his disciples were having dinner together at a man named Simon's house. A woman was there and it seems like maybe Jesus and the disciples were surprised that she was there. The disciples weren't very nice to her, but of course, Jesus was. Jesus' actions in the story remind us to be kind to everyone who eats with us.

Next week in worship, we will be reading a story of another meal, the last meal Jesus ate with his disciples. It is that meal which we remember each week when

we have communion together. I wonder if there are people in your life who would like to be invited to that meal. I bet there are...a neighbor, a friend, someone in your family. Who do you know who would like to join us next week for worship and communion? While I share my sermon, will you make an invitation inviting someone to join us next week? They can use their TV, tablet, or computer to worship with us. And then sometime this week, mail your invitation to them or drop at their front door. There is always room for one more around the Table.

Back to today's story and today's dinner. By the time this story is told in the Gospel of Mark, it is clear, Jesus was a wanted man. The tension we have felt escalating throughout this Gospel narrative is at its peak. The chief priests and the scribes were done with their questions and their tricks. It was clear Jesus wasn't going to make it easy for them, so they began actively trying to figure out how to kill him.

The story doesn't give us any indication the disciples grasped the seriousness of the situation. I mean...the crowds loved Jesus. Things were going according to plan, right? Jesus, though, knew that the crowds he was drawing were seen as a threat to the religious and political leaders who were using their position and power to oppress the ones who were vulnerable and line their own pockets. He knew he was fast approaching a point of no return and his death was imminent.

Into this tension the author of Mark placed these stories of two very different followers of Jesus. The first story is of an unnamed woman who seems like an outsider in the midst of Jesus and the disciples. She's treated like an uninvited guest who kind of crashes dinner at Simon's house. Simon knew what it was like to be an outcast. The fact that Jesus was having dinner at the house of a leper was one more example of Jesus' propensity to color outside the lines of tradition in order to include and show compassion for "the least of these."

We can imagine the woman was a friend of Simon's, but we don't know for sure. Her act of love, anointing Jesus with what might have been her most valuable possession, was symbolic. The text says she was anointing him for burial. I love that Mark tells us that Jesus, chastising his disciples for their criticism of her extravagance, said, "...wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her," yet she remains ironically unnamed in the story, like so many other women in scripture.

So, this dinner...have you experienced a tense family dinner?

If we were in the sanctuary, I would say, "This is not a rhetorical question." Of course you have; we all have. Let's not pretend that our families sit peacefully at the table every night with no arguing, no tattle-taling, no stern warnings from the parents, no awkward pause when someone brings up the thing nobody talks about, no irritation about who cooked and who has to clean up. We've all been there.

Well, that's the kind of meal I picture here. It started out okay, everyone gathered around and then it quickly went south. At some point, Judas left. Maybe he told the others he was going to meet a love interest. Maybe when Jesus chastised the disciples for being jerks to the woman, that was last straw. His ego was bruised and he thought, "You aren't the boss of me." Whatever the chain of events, Judas went to the chief priests and told them he would help them in exchange for money. After what the disciples said to the woman about using her resources to help the poor rather than anoint Jesus, you have to wonder, what was Judas' plan for his money? I don't know.

The author of Mark doesn't dwell on Judas' motivation and he doesn't expand much on the details of the woman's life. They were two followers of Jesus who reacted very differently to a particular moment in time. But, I wonder, were they really so different? They both chose to follow Jesus, presumably because the things he was saying rang true. I wonder if Jesus' message resonated with them because on some level, they both knew what it was like to be the other, to be the outcast. It made sense to them that the God who created them cared about justice, compassion, mercy, inclusion, and love. It made sense to them that human beings ought to take care of each other, stick together, feel a sense of belonging. It made sense to them that the chief priests and scribes, who were supposed to be representing God, would be on their side. If he was the Messiah their people had waited for, he could fix it all.

At some point, though, Judas lost his way. Maybe he got scared or he thought his betrayal would force Jesus to be a different kind of leader. Maybe Judas couldn't shake that thing deep inside him that made him feel like he didn't belong, even though he was "one of the twelve." When I think of these stories, and read them side by side, I am reminded that our world and our lives are full of characters, some, like the woman, whose lives seem to be an extravagant offering, reflecting

the ways of God into this world. And others whose lives, like Judas', are a reflection of the pain, fear and brokenness that permeates our world today.

This week we became aware of a horrible example of what happens when human beings reflect fear into the world. The violent murder of Ahmaud Arbery and the slow response of our criminal justice system is a result of the fear that white people have of losing power and privilege, of losing control over a system that works best for white people. The criminal justice system is just one of the systems in our country that perpetuate the evil that is racism. Black people should be able to go for a jog, walk home from a convenience store, shop, or go to church, and not fear for their safety. Parents should not have to have "the talk" with their Black children about what to do and what not to do to avoid being the victim of racial violence.

A friend opened my eyes this week to an idea I am ashamed I had never considered. We talk a lot about what parents of Black children are saying to their children about how to stay safe when they leave their homes. But what my friend wondered is, why aren't we asking parents of white children what they are saying to their children about how to keep Black people safe? She has a point. Parents of white children have the privilege of not having to talk about it. We can choose never to even mention it to our children, but we shouldn't. Racism is not going to just go away. We have to work at it. Like the woman with the valuable ointment, our faith ought to compel us to pour our lives into the ways of Jesus, which, in this time, includes the struggle for justice with our Black siblings.

And we could really start with our children. Are we talking to our white children about what to do if they hear a joke that devalues Black people or hear someone use a derogatory word to describe a Black person? Are we talking to them about how their Black friends will likely get followed by store clerks while shopping and what their responsibility is when they see it? Are we teaching them about the contributions of Black men and women to our community and to our nation? And are we telling them that when someone says, "I don't see color," that's not a good thing? Telling someone you don't notice the color of their skin denies a part of who they are. And plus, it's ridiculous. Of course we see color. And every single skin color is a reflection of God.

I have heard people talk about what we are experiencing with the pandemic as it seeming as if someone hit the pause button on the world. Our lives as we knew them have stopped and we are trying to find new ways of being. We are at a moment when we have the opportunity to create something different, to take a different path, to begin to build a world where everyone belongs, everyone has enough, and everyone is safe. We, each day, have the opportunity to be a reflection of God in a world that seems, right now, to be more of a reflection of our worst fears, our greatest pain, and the brokenness of creation.

I don't think it is helpful to villainize Judas. I think what's more helpful is for us to recognize that his betrayal is just one example, perhaps the worst example, of how the people closest to Jesus failed him dismally in Jerusalem. Let's not judge Judas too harshly because, the truth is, there's a little betrayal in all of us. There are moments in all of our lives that we would be ashamed to have Jesus walk in on. But of all people, nobody knew that better than Jesus that we are more than a moment, more than our worst day. He spent his life seeing people for who they were and loving them anyway, on their best days and their worst. In that way, Jesus was a pure reflection of God in this world. Dear ones, you are loved by God, on your best days and your worst. And that's the good news we are called to share with this hurting world. I hope you will. Amen.