

Mark 14:1-11

Keeping Time: Jesus' Last Week

(based on a book by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*)

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For the past several weeks, we've been walking through Jesus' last days in Jerusalem. We've read about him mocking the Roman government, and their militaristic imperial parades, as he rode into Jerusalem on a colt, cheered on by an enthusiastic crowd. We've looked on as he symbolically destroyed the temple because of the collaboration between temple authorities and the Roman government, and as he over and over outsmarted religious leaders, leaving the crowd spellbound by his message of justice and hopeful that maybe the status quo of the Roman system of domination could be interrupted. We have seen that Jesus chose to spend his last days proclaiming that our God is a God of justice and in God's realm the most vulnerable will have a voice.

Now we turn to Wednesday of Jesus' last week. The religious leaders have grown increasingly concerned about the crowd of people who have embraced Jesus' message. It is the crowd's enthusiastic reception of Jesus that is both the reason and the deterrent for the authorities' desire to have Jesus killed. Authors Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*, write, "Even apart from the content of any message from Jesus subversive of Roman law and order, however nonviolent it might have been, the very presence of enthusiastic crowds listening to whatever it was he said would have been deemed dangerous at any time, but especially at Passover." The *crowd* was every bit as dangerous as Jesus' message. The authorities wanted to kill Jesus to rid themselves of the crowd, but they feared what the crowd

might do if this man, who was speaking hope into their lives, was killed. It was a catch-22; damned if they did, damned if they didn't.

With the backdrop of this tension and uncertainty, the story of Wednesday focuses on what it is to be a follower of Jesus. The day's events give us the opportunity to learn from the successes and failures of the first followers of Jesus. Wednesday we see that, even in his last days, Jesus' primary concern was teaching the disciples how to be disciples and what following him would mean for their lives. He taught them about God's vision for the world, which he referred to as the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. Unfortunately, as we read the stories of Jesus teaching, we see again and again that the disciples often just didn't get it.

Have you ever told someone a story and, after hearing the story, the person to whom you told it, asked a question or made a comment which left you feeling certain the person missed the point of your story entirely? Like when you tell a friend your harrowing tale of how you spilled your Prell shampoo on the shower floor, causing you to slip and fall, hurting your head pretty significantly, and your friend says, "Wait, you use Prell...I didn't even know they made that shampoo anymore."

Private social media groups for clergy are full of stories like this. The stories often go, "So, I was standing at the door after worship, shaking hands and greeting people. A member of my congregation came through the line and said, 'Your sermon really spoke to me today.'" And then that person shares how it spoke to him or her and that explanation never, ever jives with what the minister thought he or she said.

I talked to a colleague this week who told me that, following the 2016 election, he crafted this beautiful sermon on healing division and the importance of unity. It was a sermon he was really proud of and really

excited about delivering to his somewhat politically divided congregation. In the sermon, he planned to talk about how it was time to listen to one another and confess that we are all playing a part in perpetuating division. The morning he preached the sermon he felt good. The whole time he was preaching he was making eye contact with members and everyone looked like they were into it. When he closed, several even said, "Amen." He was very pleased with how it felt. After worship, he stood at the door to greet people. The very first person came to him, shook his hand and said, "Great sermon. You are absolutely right, it is Hillary's fault this country is divided."

I think Jesus must have felt that way when, in Mark 8, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" To that question, Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Jesus responded by telling him sternly not to tell other people about him. Borg and Crossan write that, in Mark, Jesus' command to silence doesn't usually mean, "You have it right, but keep it a secret." It usually means, "You have it wrong, so be quiet." Right after this exchange, Jesus started referring to himself as "the Son of Man," and, in order to prepare them for what was to come, told them he would endure great suffering, rejection, be killed and rise again after three days. Peter's response, in typical disciple clueless fashion, was to take Jesus aside and tell him not to talk like that. Jesus responded by telling the disciples and the crowd, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." But they didn't get it.

In chapter 9, Jesus predicted his own death again. Mark took this opportunity to make fun of the disciples' inability to "get it." Here, even as Jesus predicted his own death by execution, the disciples fixated on themselves, arguing about which one of them was the greatest. Jesus sat them down, looked them in the eyes, and said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." But they still didn't get it.

In chapter 10, he told them again, as they approached Jerusalem, that he would be put to death. In great detail Jesus told them what was going to happen to him. Surely, they get it now, right?

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶ And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷ And they answered, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

They just didn’t get it.

Time after time, Jesus told the disciples that true discipleship was putting others first, serving, and participating in his message of justice and compassion. The disciples failed miserably and instead, “act(ed) like the lords, rulers, and tyrants of the gentile world (Borg and Crossan),” the world that Jesus spent his life, including his last week in Jerusalem, trying to upset.

On Wednesday of that last week, the author of Mark provides us with a story of one follower of Jesus who “gets” discipleship in the best way--- and a story of one who rejects it in the worst way. This is their story:

14 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; ² for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

³ 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. ⁴ But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷ 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.⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. ¹¹ 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.

Let’s compare the actions of the woman who anointed Jesus to how Peter, James and John responded in the previous chapters. The woman, having heard Jesus’ message, *believed him*, and rather than telling him not to talk about it, rather than worrying about what would happen to her, or asking him for a promotion, chose to *participate* in what Jesus was doing by anointing him. Borg and Crossan point out that, “She is, for Mark, the first believer. She is, for us, the first Christian.” In Mark’s story, she believed, without seeing Jesus arrested, without seeing him on the cross, without seeing an empty tomb. She believed and she participated.

The unnamed woman represents the perfect disciple, and is contrasted with Judas, who represents the worst. The author of Mark doesn’t tell us why Judas chose to betray Jesus. The text tells us they offered him money, but that doesn’t mean money was the reason Judas betrayed him. The emphasis in Mark is on Judas being one of the twelve disciples. In fact, every time the author mentioned Judas, he was called, “Judas, one of the twelve.” Without Judas, the authorities would have had to arrest Jesus in the daylight, in front of the crowd, a very dangerous prospect. The story of Wednesday ends there, with the plan set in motion. The authorities will get what they want, thanks to Judas’ colossal failure as a disciple.

I don't know about you, but in my life, I've spent more time thinking about the actions of Judas than I have thinking about the woman who anointed Jesus. I've spent time thinking about why he did it. Did he do it for money? Was he a thief at heart? Did he give up on nonviolent resistance? Was he just plain scared? Honestly, I think I've thought more about Judas because I'm more like Judas than I am like the woman. I think I desperately want Judas to have had a good reason for what he did.

Maybe then my own failures won't seem like betrayals either. Maybe the times I choose to remain silent in the face of injustice are really not a big deal if I have a good reason. Maybe how I spend my money doesn't really matter since I don't have a lot of it. Maybe it's okay for me to use fear as an excuse to avoid change, to keep my neighbors at arm's length, or to avoid being the person God created me to be. Maybe if I don't do anything, it will give God an opportunity to shine.

The truth is, all of it matters. Mark's point is that being a "good disciple" matters. Being a "bad disciple" matters. All of Jesus' disciples fail, from the first twelve to the ones gathered here in this room. The idea of a "perfect disciple" is a myth. The good news is, the fact that there are disciples in this room means the disciples before us must have gotten some things right. And there is more good news...Just as Jesus called the first twelve, in spite of their short-comings, to participate with him in bringing about the kin-dom of God, we are called to participate in that same work.

*Borg and Crossan remind us that, "Each year, the season of Lent asks us to repent, change, and participate in the transition {from death to resurrection} with Jesus." Jesus' death was not a *substitute* for our participation. Jesus did not die to excuse our bad behavior. Jesus died because his behavior and his words were dangerous...they were dangerous because they inspired hope in people who were desperate

for it. His death shows us what real participation is. It is being willing to put the well-being of others above our own comfort and our personal interests. Jesus told the disciples that following him would be uncomfortable, painful, and just plain hard. They followed him anyway. They failed, but sometimes they succeeded. And we will too. Amen.