

“What a Waste”

Message for March 21, 2010

To our friends who usually read the sermon:

This day’s sermon was done more “casually,” and I didn’t type it in full. It looks more like notes – but hopefully, you’ll still get the main message. Thanks for your patience! (I’m trying to “preach” instead of read today).

Today – chance for me to share with you some of what I’ve learned in the class I just finished. May not be sermon so much as a presentation – but will give us all something to consider as we move closer to the last week of Lent.

What I’ve been exposed to (still need to process some):

Many versions of the same stories – all with pieces that, when connected, put Jesus together for us.

Each Gospel writer had a reason to tell the story the way he did: Mark, soonest after resurrection for Jewish converts (with Peter), Matthew and Luke next (Matthew copied – why?), Luke for Gentiles, non-believers, Romans (with Paul), then John – his own poetry and interpretation.

Women’s roles in the Bible are limited – this does NOT represent the importance of them in the early church. It DOES represent how their role was viewed at the time the books were rewritten and selected for the Bible we have today.

Does this change our faith? It shouldn’t – and someday we’ll talk more about how the books of the Bible came to us.

And so, the Story of the Anointing at Bethany.

Briefly retell story...remind of earlier incident in John – (Lazarus is revived). Party to celebrate! Remind of story of Lazarus – Jesus was called to deathbed, etc. This family is known to him – they are friends. We’ve heard about them before (Martha and Mary – Martha working in the kitchen, Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet, learning).

Let’s look at this story in sections...beginning with Mary.

(hold up Synopsis).

Mary – everywhere in the Bible! Tell of how four Gospels differ (Matt/Mark same story; Luke – no name – later identified; John is reading for today).

Lots of discussion why/why not use of women’s names – status of women was lower for sure, but it’s thought the names were left out when books were selected

for Canon – because of THAT time's beliefs! Early versions in Greek and Aramaic are more accurate...versions we have now are just that – someone's interpretation.

John's Gospel is the newest – and John's version puts Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene – many scholars believe they are possibly the same person; Magdalene is a description of her status – possibly not really her family name or the name given her because she was from Magdala. In Aramaic, "magdala" means "tower" or "elevated, great, magnificent". Considering her status this makes sense.

All four Gospels mention her in different ways – she probably helped support Jesus ministry with money and of course her time.

No matter which Gospel you read, Mary was important.

Mary first at empty tomb, saw and spoke with him too. (1 of 3 visits with dialog after resurrection) Luke says Jesus cured her of some emotional problems – 7 demons sent away...she would be devoted to him...and her behavior in our reading today would make sense.(Credibility because Jesus spoke to her).

In books not included in the Bible (Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Thomas) – she plays key roll – friend and constant companion of Jesus. Some disciples recognize her status and accept it – Peter continually doubted her messages and authority.

Gospel of Mary – did you know there was one? – puts her in prophet status.

Fragments found of original document – much of it not available, but what is available is clearly message from Jesus, indicating trust in Mary as one of the chosen herself. Peter scoffs – Levi defends.

Scholars believe that for years, MM served as a serious Apostle – even a leader of the early church. She sat at the foot of the Rabbi and took her lessons seriously – other ancient documents still being evaluated point to her importance. Fascinating stuff. I could do a whole month series on Mary alone!

What about the oil? Mark's Gospel tells us more about it and why Judas would care...

The pot was supposed to contain distilled oil called **spikenard**, an expensive 'perfume' - earthy, pungent aroma – (gathered from parts of the flower of a native plant from the Himalayas) that would have cost the equivalent of a year's wages for a laborer. Today - \$8/hour x 365 days, almost \$3000!

Brought to Palestine via alabaster bottles, sealed with wax and twine – wax seal saved to keep it in bottle. Used for leprosy, for hair, and scent help with sleep.

Used for kingly or messianic anointing if placed on the head - the task of the high priest. Mary's act puts her in another level of status for early Christians – she dared to do what her heart wanted to do.

And Judas' place? He was keeper of the groups' cash – money would be tight and he would be appalled at how much she just “threw” away. To him, this would be a true waste of resources...even though he loved Jesus, he was a weaker person than most. (John puts a little dig in with how Judas was known to help himself from the coffers!).

But, since Mary likely had money (to help with ministry), she would have had enough to own a jar of this oil, and like dad in Lost Son story of last week – would have brought out the best of everything for this party to celebrate Lazarus' new life.

Implications:

This vignette provides us with several key pieces to what will soon happen to Jesus...

Healing Lazarus – after four days in a tomb, stinky and dead – he's back and there's a party for him. It would be a community celebration...

Leaders of the church and community threatened – it's time to get rid of this troublemaker!

Mary has done something outrageous and bold – more attention to the followers of Jesus – more trouble ahead for everyone.

Judas sees it all – and maybe has a change of heart. We all know what Judas did not long after.

It's the beginning of the end...and Mary quite possibly had a hand in it. Hear what our UCC lectionary says about this time in Jesus' ministry:

...Mary the passionate one, the one who loves Jesus with her whole heart, loves to sit at his feet and listen to him, Mary, full of love and gratitude and very little inhibition. No, Mary doesn't let anything hold her back, and more than anyone else – even the guys who have been following Jesus all this time, hearing his words, watching him in action, even more than these, Mary sees the big picture. She recognizes who Jesus is, and what lies ahead for him, and she acts on it. She does things not acceptable in polite company in that culture and time: she unbinds her hair, loosens it as women did only for their husbands or when they were in mourning; she pours expensive balm on the feet of Jesus (his feet, as one would anoint a corpse, not a king – a king would be anointed on the head), and Mary touches Jesus even though she's a single woman – not appropriate... and then she wipes his feet with her hair. No inhibition indeed! Just as Jesus began his ministry with an extravagance of excellent wine at a wedding feast, so

his ministry comes to a close here in an extravagance of expensive oil, in a passionate display of love and caring that even the woman who offers it does not fully understand.

The wonderful preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, calls this display by Mary the Prophet "an act so lavish that it suggests another layer to her prophecy: there will be nothing prudent or economical about the death of this man, just as there has been nothing prudent or economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest."

No matter what version we read in the Gospels, Mary of Bethany (or Mary Magdalene) or the "woman who sinned" - let down her hair, used expensive oil, and cried tears of pain from deep in her soul – because she'd been part of Jesus' life, and she could sense what was coming.

Her act of extravagance pays homage to her friend and teacher - and she doesn't care how much it cost.

I'd like to think we would do the same, even in today's economy.

We would find a way to display our love – we would give our most precious possession to someone just to demonstrate our commitment and love for them – it's what people do who truly care.

Come to think of it, God did the same for us...

Amen.