

“From Palms to Passion”

Mark 14: 1-11

Palm Sunday/B, April 9, 2006

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*What wondrous love is this, oh my soul, oh my soul
What wondrous love is this, oh my soul,
What wondrous love is this, that Christ should come in bliss
To bear the heavy cross for my soul, for my soul
To bear the heavy cross for my soul.*

What wondrous love, so deep, so profound this unnamed woman can not help but respond? At great cost, she comes to the house of Simon the Leper to anoint Jesus. She comes to Jesus---to the house of an outcast---to demonstrate her deep devotion and affection, to perform a memorial ritual no one else is willing or able to perform. She comes to a house full of strangers unafraid to do God's will, knowing she is safe with Jesus. She comes deliberately and quietly, but does not linger. She stays only long enough to do what needs to be done. Without hesitation, she breaks the jar, anoints her beloved's head, and leaves as gently and unassumingly as she has come. The men chastise and ridicule her. But Jesus, exalts her, memorializes her, embraces her, and thanks her for her poignantly beautiful act of loving-kindness. This woman comes—unnamed and selfless; not to acquire notoriety, but to show the Jesus what he means to her, what he means to the world. She departs, without recognition or praise, to be remembered as the one who set aside all costs to show her love for Jesus.

This is how Mark's gospel begins the incredibly story Jesus' final days. In the aftermath of the triumphant entry with its excitement and drama, there is a triumphant entry of a different kind. After Jesus' unexpected arrival on a colt, the crowd's adoration, the fulfillment of the scriptures, this woman ushers us from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. Jesus knows this is the beginning of the end. He has tried again and again to prepare his disciples for this moment. All too soon, Jesus will make his way to the cross. Parades end. The shouting crowds go home, the streets become silent and Jesus is left with his circle of friends, to prepare for the rest of the journey.

Jesus has already spoken several times of his death. Yet none of them seems to understand. Perhaps they are trying to deny what he tells them, to protect them from the awful reality of his impending death. After all, we have done the same ourselves. It is natural to want to deny the undeniable approach of death. To believe an angel of mercy will swoop in and save us, that the end will come later than sooner as we have been warned. We want more time. We need to believe it isn't so. We have no problem creating myths and super heroes to save us from death. We have a far more difficult time journeying toward death gracefully. We long to be that statistical anomaly that cheats death by going into remission, that beats that dreaded cancer. We convince ourselves that we can be the one person to speak our truth and not pay the cost for our truthfulness. Jesus faced his death with grace and peace. Those who loved him seemed unable to do the same. They loved him too much, needed him too much, to allow him to be who God had sent him to be. It was not Jesus' failing that we react this way. We can not act as this unnamed woman did when we become trapped in our own inertia, unable to trust deeply enough in the power of love to risk everything to respond.

*To God and to the lamb, I will sing, I will sing,
To God and to the lamb, I will sing,
To God and to the lamb, who is the great I Am?
While millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing
While millions join the theme, I will sing.*

For some reason, this unnamed woman understood Jesus, she believed Jesus, and she trusted Jesus. If this were Jesus' final moments, then someone needed to minister to him. She needed to show him that she understood, that she believed he was ready to submit to God's will, even to be crucified. She enters Simon's house with a singular purpose, to anoint Jesus in preparation for his death. She does not count the cost. She sacrifices not only her highly priced jar of ointment, but herself as well. A woman does not barge into a home full of men without consequences. A woman would not anoint Jesus in the company of men and not face ridicule. One does not "waste" something so precious without an argument that it could have been used more wisely or efficiently.

She was not concerned with efficiency. She was not thinking of the needs of the poor. Her singular concern was Jesus. She needed to show him the kind of mercy and compassion he had shown so often to others. Jesus was about to sacrifice himself for all of them, for all of us, and she needed to show him

how much she loved him. She didn't care about the money. She didn't care about the ridicule. She did not care if this act cost her own life.

Have you ever been summoned to the bedside of one who is ready to die? Death can teach us so much about life, if we are willing to receive her difficult lessons. Having the courage to respond, to speak, to reach out and to love someone into the next life can be an incredible gift. Jesus was ready to receive this woman's gift. He was ready to face his own crucifixion. It is a beautiful thing to be at peace with oneself, to leave this world without regrets knowing that you have done your best to live your life faithfully and gracefully. Does this mean you have lived perfectly? Indeed not! It may mean that you have lived prayerfully, placed your life into God's hands, confessing your sins and been assured of God's grace and love. This is not easy to do. As human beings we tend more often to cling, to deny, to wish it were not so, to hedge our bets. However, death comes to all of us, some more easily than others. Our culture has no problem telling people how to live. When it comes to death, however, we back off, clam up, change the subject, we become nervous or afraid.

Jesus says, "whoever wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross; and follow me." This unnamed woman knows exactly what Jesus is asking of her. The disciples, on the other hand, run—run from Jesus---run from his cross. It will take the resurrection for them to become loyal followers—no longer cowards, but devout, passionate, followers of Jesus. It will take a post resurrection meeting in Galilee for the disciples to be transformed by the death and resurrection of their leader. They will not understand until they meet him again on the other side. Then they will become bold and courageous. But this unnamed woman—already she has denied herself, already she has identified with Jesus' death, already she has sacrificed everything to show her love for Jesus.

As we prepare ourselves to experience the passion and drama of Holy Week, we hear this story and we celebrate this woman's love, her passion, her witness, and her joy. This woman trusted in the Lord. She trusted in the promises of God. She did not know what Jesus' death would bring. She had no way of knowing the pain, or suffering or injustice that was about to unfold. She did not have some special insight about the resurrection. She did not have to know any of those things in order to respond. The events would unfold as God intended and she understood in ways none of the others could; that she was called by God to perform this ritual of comfort and

peace. Jesus assures her that she will never be forgotten. Even though she is not identified by name, her story would be told throughout the ages, in remembrance of her.

So many people testify to the presence of the Holy Spirit at the end of life when family comes together to usher a loved one into the realm beyond. These homecomings can be difficult. There are often old wounds that need healing, broken relationships that need mending, resentments that have lingered far too long. This unnamed woman gives us the courage to do whatever needs to be done to make it right. When the end comes or appears imminent we set such things aside. We let love be our guide. We let love be our protector. We let love be the wind that carries us to that place we could not go before. If love is the power that brings us together, love will be the power that heals our broken hearts and ensures us that life can go on, that death never has the final answer.

*And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on,
And when from death I'm free, I'll sing and joyful be,
And through eternity, I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
and through eternity, I'll sing on.*

Jesus wants so much for his disciples. He does not want us to be encumbered by his death. Eventually, the disciples fail him, they deny him, they desert him, but they never stop loving him. We will likely do the same at some point in our lives. However, much like those disciples, Jesus will never stop loving us because of it.

Jesus teaches us to be free, in life, in death, in life beyond death. It is the power of love that sets us free, that makes us sing, even in the wake of great loss and pain. We sing through our grief, we sing through our tears, we sing when we should not be able to sing, because we believe. We know what awaits us beyond the cross. We know that death is not the end, that death does not have the final answer. We also know that love has the power to overcome injustice, to heal all wounds, to reconcile those who are estranged from each other. We need only accept and name this love, only acknowledge the source of this love, only submit to this love and we shall be healed. When we can, when we do, we will join this unnamed woman in her song, a song of love that rings throughout eternity. May it be so! Amen

Opening prayer

Draw close to us, God,
On this unusual day,
This day of confusion,
Of shouts of joy and cries of shame.
Reminds us that you are with us always,
In all moods and all seasons,
In darkness and light and in between,
Lead us through this day and this week,
To the cross, to the tomb, and beyond. Amen