

Lenten Four Reflection—Some Thoughts

The story is found in all four gospels and with each rendering there are additions such as who the woman was, who was complaining, etc.

We are focusing on Mark's version, MARK 14: 3-9 — the first gospel to be written and perhaps the one closest to what might have really occurred.

Jesus Anointed at Bethany

^{3b}And while he was at ^cBethany in the house of Simon the leper,¹ as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. ⁴ There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii² and ^dgiven to the poor." And they ^escolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ For ^fyou always have the poor with you, and whenever ^gyou want, you can do good for them. But ^hyou will not always have me. ⁸ⁱShe has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand ^jfor burial. ⁹ And truly, I say to you, wherever ^kthe gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told ^lin memory of her."

A few thoughts about Mark's version. The banquet is set in Bethany, a town on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Jesus is reclining at a table in someone's home. The woman in Mark's version is unnamed; she risks insult and humiliation by entering a banquet uninvited and anointing Jesus feet. This is the second story in a short bit in which Jesus encounters an underprivileged woman who offers an extravagant gift.

What is the story saying about women and their ability to give from what little they have?

Mark tells this story in memory of the unnamed woman and Jesus said that what has been done will be told in memory of her. **Do we tell the story in memory of her?** This story offers an opportunity to think about all the women in the Gospels whose stories are not remembered or not told. As was the case then, there are so many women today whose stories are not remembered or are not told.

In Mark's version of the story the people who complain about the woman's extravagant generosity are just some people sitting at table. **But why are they complaining?** In the early Christian communities, it was important to share

resources: material, friendship, love and power. An honourable person would never acquire more than what was needed because to do so was to use personal power to take what was another's.

However, it is highly likely that many of the men sitting around the table were not honest in that regard and that is why they are bad-mouthing

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the woman. Often when people feel guilty about something, they are doing that which is not right so they complain about the same in another.

In the story of the woman giving money in the temple and, later, the anointing by the woman, oppressed and poor, they have given all they have. Their actions come from compassion for others contrasted to others complaining that the money should be for the poor. One wonders why they raise concern over the perfume and the poor while unfazed by their own lavish dinner!

As was true in so many of Jesus' encounters with women, he did not reprimand the woman, but values her action. She was anointing him, preparing him for what was to come. In this story she does not anoint Jesus' feet, but his head...

anointing on the head is what one would do for a king. Here again we see Jesus being recognized as a King who will lead people toward justice and peace. Psalm 23: 5 "Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

A woman, oppressed, silenced, and invisible is the one appointed to anoint a king. **What is this saying about the early Christians' teaching of Jesus?**

Jesus ministers to precisely this group of people — sharing God's love extravagantly with them.

Again, there is so much going on in this story and perhaps you can continue to imagine other things that are happening and why they might be happening.

Jesus calls for her remembrance and perhaps he is suggesting that when we tell his story we must tell her story and we must tell the story of all who are silenced, oppressed, ignored, despised, and rejected.

- A few questions to consider: In situations when you complain about another person's behaviour and action,...what is behind the complaining?
- How do you respond to your concern about the poor?
- How do you help to name and hold up the untold stories of women?

- What are you willing to risk for something you believe in or in someone who values us?

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Each time we tell the story it may change but each time we tell the story we do so in memory of Jesus and the risk-taking woman.

Thanks to Amy-Jill Levine for her review and insights (Entering the Story of Jesus) of this story found in all four gospels.