



Grace in a Broken Jar

Matthew 26:6-16

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Hosanna, loud Hosanna! We kick off Holy Week with a reminder of Jesus's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and a colt while there was shouting and the waving of palm branches. What a week it's going to be!

Throughout this season of Lent, we have been looking at stories of how God's grace is encountered in unexpected places and in unexpected ways. If you have missed any Sundays this season, I invite you to go back and read through or listen to the sermons on the church website, wsumc.com, as we close out Lent this Thursday and Friday to prepare yourself for Easter next Sunday. Easter is a celebration for us, but we must not gloss over this week to come; we must struggle with the events of this week, with the Last Supper on Thursday, the trek to the Cross on Friday, and the silence of the Tomb on Saturday, so that we may be prepared for the celebration next Sunday.

As we enter into this Holy Week, we once again find a story of the grace of God experienced by an unsuspecting person in a most unexpected encounter with Christ.

As the Passover week drew close, Jews from all over the region had started to descend upon Jerusalem. Each year, in preparation for the Passover, Jewish pilgrims made their way to the Holy City to remember and celebrate the great saving and redeeming act of God, who had saved the Israelites from slavery to the Egyptians, led them through the wilderness, and brought them into the Promised Land. It is important we don't lose track of the frame of mind of Jesus and his disciples as they, faithful Jews in the community of Israel, made their way to Jerusalem for this most holy of Jewish celebrations. The final week of Christ's earthly ministry will come amidst the Jewish faithful as they have gathered to remember and offer thanks to God for the great grace of God, recalled in the great act of redemption in the Passover.

Jerusalem is over-crowded. Even in the first-century, when the population was significantly smaller than it is today, the number of Jews in Jerusalem grew to nearly four-times the normal residency during the Passover week. Because of the limited space in Jerusalem, Jesus has chosen to stay just East of Jerusalem in Bethany at the home of friends and supporters. Each day, Jesus would make the two-mile trek over the Mount of Olives, down through the Kidron Valley, and up to the Temple to teach. On the first day of the week, Jesus was making his way up the Eastern side of the Mount of Olives and had stopped in a small place called Bethpage. He sent the disciples ahead to find the donkey and the colt, and to bring them that he would have an animal on which to ride into Jerusalem.

The disciples do as they are told; to their surprise, they find the donkey just as they were told they would, and they bring it to Jesus.

Jesus gets on the donkey and starts to make his descent down the Mount of Olives and across the Kidron Valley, up to the Old City and the Temple Mount.

Along side him are all the Jewish pilgrims who are also making their way into Jerusalem. The faithful Jewish pilgrims start to take off their cloaks and lay them on the road in front of the donkey. Others start cutting down branches from trees and laying them down amidst the cloaks lying on the road.

As Jesus rides in on the donkey, as the people are laying a clean path on which the donkey may walk, these Jewish faithful are exclaiming out loud, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

This happens all the way into to the city of Jerusalem. Once inside the city, there are even more Jewish pilgrims. Jesus's entrance had made such a commotion that they start turning to one another and inquiring, "Who is this man who receives such an entourage into the city?" Others, who know Jesus, say in return, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

The week couldn't have started out any better for Jesus. He is receiving recognition among a growing contingency of the Jews. He is welcomed into the city like a king – with palm branches and riding upon a mighty stallion ... ok, perhaps it's only a donkey. Perhaps it's not quite a king's reception, but the point stands, his notoriety is quickly growing.

The warm welcome seems to be strengthening Jesus's willingness to speak and act boldly, for shortly following his entrance into the city, his first act is to go to the temple and turn the tables and chastise the market vendors. That first day, Jesus healed the lame and gave sight to the blind. All that he said and did was witnessed by the chief priests and the scribes, and they began to resent his presence among them.

Jesus went back out to Bethany for the night, only to come back into the city the next day and continue his healing and his teaching.

The week was going surprisingly well. The disciples were loving every minute of it. The man they had been following, the man that they believed to be the Savior, the man they had given up their jobs to learn from and travel with, he was finally receiving the recognition they believed he was due. They followed him everywhere he went – from Bethany each night into the city and Temple each day. Their three years of hard work finally seemed to be paying off – Jesus was ready to come into his reign as the King of the Jews, the Son of God, the Messiah of the world.

This happened each day – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – the disciples followed him, witnessing his preaching and teaching, witnessing his growing crowd of followers, witnessing him gaining popularity and trust among the Jews.

On Wednesday, Jesus and the disciples again left Jerusalem to head back to Bethany. Tonight they would be staying at Simon the leper's house. Admittedly, the disciples were a little unsure about staying at Simon's house. He was, after all, a leper. He was someone who would have been considered an outcast in society, and staying at his house would leave all of them to be seen as unclean. They wouldn't be allowed back in the temple the next day if it was found out they had been hanging out with a leper – much less sleeping in the home of a leper. Yet, Jesus has a habit of rejecting the religious and cultural claim of what it means to be unclean. Much like we read last week in Matthew 9 as Jesus went to touch the little girl who had been declared dead, and as he was touched by and healed the bleeding woman, Jesus rejects the claim that one should be considered unworthy of being in community simply because of outdated laws of ritual purity.

So there they are at the house, sitting at the table, likely in the midst of dinner. This woman comes in, walks up to Jesus, and take a jar of very expensive ointment, and pours it over Jesus's head.

Can you imagine this taking place? Put yourself in a seat of a disciple. When I try to visualize this taking place, all I can think is that it seems like one of those Impractical Joker clips, or an episode of Punk'd or Candid Camera. The woman walks in, walks right up to Jesus, and just dumps it. Everyone around them is left speechless.

But as the reality of the moment sets in, as no camera men or Ashton Kucher jump out and make the surprise, the aroma of the ointment, the purity of the liquid, the color as it runs down Jesus' hair makes it clear that this was no second-hand perfume – this was quality ointment – and this is no joke. This woman wasn't just messing around, she had come with intention.

The disciples quickly turn from a state of confusion to a feeling of anger and resentment. "Why are you wasting this," they ask her. "This was quality stuff! We could have sold this for a large sum and given the money to the poor."

Keep in mind, this week has been a good week so far for the disciples. They are feeling vindicated for their time and dedication to Jesus, who they considered their rabbi. But they're already on edge tonight. They are staying at the home of a leper, and are probably unsure of how the following day will go. And now, already tense with uncertainty, this woman has just come and dumped a good jar of ointment all over Jesus's head.

It was well known according to rabbinical tradition that luxury items were to be sold to help care for the poor. It would not be good for the Jesus crowd if it were found out that Jesus had allowed a jar of expensive ointment to be wasted. First a leper's home, and now a breach of rabbinical code. What seemed to be a great week was quickly going down hill.

The woman is still standing there, perhaps still emptying out the rest of the jar on Jesus' head. And there is Jesus, sitting back from the table, now with the ointment dripping down off his hair.

Jesus finally speaks, "Why do you trouble this woman? She has performed a good service for me. You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. What she has done will always be remembered."

Make no mistake about what Jesus says, he doesn't mix words. Jesus is not discouraging the need to care for the poor. We know from the teachings he has been offering throughout his ministry that he cares deeply for the poor, and believes the disciples should also be caring for the poor. But the disciples have brought up the rabbinical code – they have challenged what the woman is doing by quoting the call to sell the ointment and give the money to the poor. So, Jesus falls in suit.

The rabbinical code focused on two primary tasks – caring for the poor and burying the dead.ⁱ Out of the two tasks, caring for the dead was given a higher priority as it was time sensitive. Religious custom only allowed for a short time to prepare a body for burial, but giving to the poor could be done at any time. "The poor will always be with you" is not a derogatory statement regarding the poor, "but [is rather] a simple recognition that giving to the poor is an ongoing obligation, not one that has to be done at the right time or no time at all."ⁱⁱ

Jesus corrects the disciples and offers a word of grace to the woman, saying she had done rightly. Once more we see in this scene the one who was without status in the culture being the one for whom Christ gives thanks. The uninvited woman who seemingly goes against the disciples' knowledge of faithfulness is the one who is praised by Christ.

The story concludes and we can't help but wonder about the thoughts of the disciples. In a week that was going so well, we have now encountered three quick concerns: we're spending the night in the house of a leper, this woman just wasted an expensive jar of ointment, and Jesus is now saying it's right for her to prepare him for a burial? In such a place, in such a state of confusion, the disciples seem angered. Perhaps they're angered because they don't understand what's happening. That's not unusual – we often get angered when we feel left out of the loop of understanding. Or, perhaps they're mad because in a week that's going so well, they've just been demoted to the praise of an uninvited and unknown woman. That's also not unusual – we often get angered when we feel like someone who is culturally defined as less worthy gets the promotion and praise we feel belongs to us.

Now, listen up, in the midst of the unexpected grace of God, we have an option of how we will respond. We can get curious or we can get mad.

One disciple gets mad. Judas can't take it. Judas is unwilling to allow that such love, such grace, such praise could go to someone so unexpected. It goes against everything he had ever known or been taught. So Judas, in a response of anger, goes to the temple leaders and offers to sell-out Christ for thirty pieces of silver. ... Such anger is one option. We can sell out against the almighty love of Christ for the treasures of the world. Believe me, the world is willing to give you wealth if you would but turn away from Christ, turn against those whom Christ welcomes and embraces, turn against those who might receive the praise you feel you rightly deserve. If you don't want to follow the inclusive and reconciling love of Christ to the cross, you may find yourself the beneficiary of wealthy and proud benefactors.

But there is another option. The other disciples are curious. They don't understand it all, but they stick with Christ. They find themselves by his side at the table, in the garden, at the cross, and in his resurrected presence. They aren't going to be wealthy, at least not by the world's standards. But they are going to be in the presence of the risen Lord.

The challenge of the texts invites us to answer the question, where are you? Are you following Judas into the courts of the temple leaders, seeking wealth – selling out on the replicated grace of God that you may benefit? Or are among the disciples running to the tomb on Sunday morning, seeking just one more glimpse of the radical love of God in Christ? Are you looking for worldly pleasures, or faithful community? Are you living out of anger at Christ's invitation to the outcast and forgotten, or are you standing with Christ and offering an invitation of the love of God to all who the world would reject?

Let us journey this week together. From the loud hosannas of Palm Sunday, to the leper's house on Wednesday, to the upper room on Thursday, to the hill of Golgotha on Friday. Let us lie in wait with one another on Saturday. And then let us join again together in curiosity as we approach the empty tomb on Sunday. Stay curious my friend. Amen.

ⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.