

Passion Pilgrimage: Honoring Jesus
Psalm 103:1-18, Mark 14:1-11
February 19, 2012

I recall a clip from *America's Funniest Home Videos*. A young man wanted to propose marriage to his girlfriend so he flew home to see her. He asked his fellow passengers on the airplane for their assistance in his proposal. He had several dozen roses distributed, one to each person on the plane. As they exited the plane, they were to hand his girlfriend the rose and say, "John loves you!"

The plane pulled into the gate and Sally stood waiting for John. The passengers began to disembark and one by one, they gave their roses to Sally saying, "John loves you!" Soon she was overwhelmed by dozens of roses. The last person to come off the plane was John. He got down on his knees and said, "Sally will you marry me?" After that show of extravagant and passionate love, what do you suppose she said?

John was passionately in love with Sally and he displayed his love in an extravagant way. Passion is a deep, ardent affection and love. Jesus had such a passionate love for his fellow human beings and he has it for us. He went to the extremes of expressing his love in an extravagant way, in a sacrificial way by dying on the cross. Beginning today and through the Lenten season which begins on Wednesday, we are going to live through the stories of Jesus' passion, the suffering of his last week of life which was symbolic of his fervent love for us. These stories not only speak of Jesus' love for his followers, but they also teach us how we can express our love for Jesus in return.

The nameless woman who anoints Jesus' head with ointment was like John in offering an extravagant display of love for Jesus. She has obviously experienced the transforming power of Jesus' love in her life and she wants to express her love for him. With her act, she recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, which means "the anointed one." Typically kings and sometimes prophets were the ones who were anointed on the head with oil. This woman recognizes that Jesus is not the militaristic kind of Messiah her people expected. She knows that Jesus is a Suffering Servant and with the ointment she anoints him for his burial. This follows a custom in the ancient East to first bathe, then anoint the bodies of the dead. The flask containing the ointment was broken and the fragments were placed in the tomb with the body.

The nameless woman honors Jesus by recognizing him as the Christ, the anointed one of God. She consciously chooses to orient her life around him, to allow him to be the leader of her life. Disciples of Jesus honor him by making a deliberate decision to recognize him as our Lord and to put him at the center of our lives. Followers of Christ strive to model their lives after his example of

servanthood. We show honor or dishonor to Jesus with every choice, action, and word of our lives.

One of the specific ways this anonymous woman honors Jesus is in the way she spends her money. We are told that the jar of ointment she used cost a year's worth of wages. At our current minimum wage that's about \$17,000. In our area the median annual income is closer to \$100,000. This unnamed follower elects to spend her wealth in a way that honors Jesus. Those who witness this event in the home of Simon the leper scold her for her foolishness. They consider her use of the jar of ointment wasteful; they suggest that it should have been used for the poor.

Jesus, however, affirms the woman's use of the money. He acknowledges that giving to the poor is an ongoing requirement of the moral life, but it does not substitute for personal acts of love for individuals. Both public acts of charity and private acts of compassion are part of the Christian life.

The irony is that immediately following this story we find Judas making arrangements with the chief priests to betray Jesus. They promise to pay him money for his dirty deed. The chief priests use their money to purchase evil in contrast to the nameless woman who uses her money to express her love.

This nameless woman is an exemplary disciple of Jesus in contrast to Judas, who betrays Jesus. She has heard Jesus' three prophecies of his death and resurrection and believes him. Since he is going to die and rise, she acts to anoint him now before his death, knowing that she may not have the opportunity to do so afterwards. Through her sacrificial act of love, this woman demonstrates that she understands the way of the cross and expresses her solidarity with Jesus in this most difficult passage to his death. At this point in his ministry when the tension is greatest and the stakes are highest, "where the deepest personal trust and loyalty are required, the woman's solidarity with Jesus and his way has no price, whereas Judas 'sells out' for silver."¹ Judas' behavior is an example of how those closest to Jesus miserably failed him in his hour of need. In contrast this unnamed woman's devotion to Jesus has been long remembered.

What can we learn from this exemplary disciple of Jesus about honoring Jesus? First, she shows us that we honor Jesus by our stewardship of the most valuable treasures of our lives. As we spend our money, do we ever consider if we are honoring Jesus with our purchase?

In the early 1920's a Methodist layman gave \$100,000 to build a college in Liberia. By the 1940's the college had grown and was meeting the educational and spiritual needs of many young Africans. On a special anniversary of the college's founding the administration decided it was time to make a formal thank you to its benefactor. It took months for our General Board of Missions to track down that Methodist layman. He had lost everything in the crash of 1929 and was living in a

little house on the south side of Chicago. Twice he refused to see the representatives from our Board of Missions, but then he finally agreed to receive them. At their insistence he was flown to Africa for a gala celebration of the college's anniversary. As he looked over the campus, filled with hundreds of students with smiles on their faces and tomorrow in their eyes, he whispered to the college president, "The only thing I have kept is what I give away."ⁱⁱ

Dare we be lavish and generous in sharing what God has given to us? We can honor Jesus in the way we spend our resources.

A second way the nameless woman honors Jesus is with her deed of love. In lavishing ointment on his head, she performs a good work, an act of love. Jesus calls her deed "beautiful." She acts on her intuition and seizes an opportunity to express her care. This woman of faith demonstrates how disciples of Jesus express their love for him in their service to others. She models loving behavior toward our neighbors.

A woman waiting for a train in a big city station saw a young mother desperately trying to cope with two crying children and an armload of packages. She also saw a teenage girl sitting nearby who quickly went to the harried mother and offered to help by taking care of the children until the train arrived. The mother, delighted with this offer, gladly accepted and left to get a much-needed bite to eat. Shortly she returned and the teenager again offered her help in carrying the packages to the train. As the train pulled out of the station she stood on the platform and waved good-bye.

The woman observing all of this now watched as the girl returned to the station lobby and shortly offered to help yet another mother with small children. The scene was repeated several times over.

The woman who had been witnessing all of this was both puzzled and fascinated as the same scenario unfolded several more times. Finally she approached the girl, saying, "I'm curious. I've been watching you for an hour or so and you've spent the entire time helping young mothers and their children. Why are you doing this?"

The teenager replied, "Oh, I was one of five children. My dad was in the army and we were always moving from one place to another. My mom used to get so tired carrying the packages and suitcases and caring for all of us, and I always wanted to help her. I remember her saying to me, 'You are so good with children.' My dad went to war in Europe and never came back, so that left mom alone. And she just recently died, so I thought that maybe I could do something for others because she said I was so good with kids. I thought there would be a lot of tired mothers here so that's why I come to the depot. It makes me feel good. It really helps."ⁱⁱⁱ

We honor Jesus with the actions of our lives, our deeds of love. We honor God when we use the gifts God has given us to serve our neighbors.

The Lenten season is a dedicated time for us to consider how we are honoring Jesus with the resources entrusted to our care: our time, money, energy, material possessions, and relationships. It is a season for us to be intentional about honoring Jesus with deeds of love. I trust that we will find the rewards of honoring Jesus rich and bountiful enough that we will choose to honor him not simply for a season, but for the entire course of our lives.

May you be richly blessed as you chose to honor Jesus in all your living.

Gracious God, Source of every good and perfect gift, your blessings to us are beyond measure. We praise you for the everflowing stream of grace showered upon us. Although sometimes we are unaware of them, you continue to lavish us with goodness and grace. We pause to offer you thanks for the blessings we as individuals have received....

We praise you for the awesome gift of Jesus the Christ, who walked with integrity upon this earth and who endured scorn and persecution to show us a faithful way to walk with you. We have chosen to follow Jesus and his Way, to honor him as the center of our being and doing. When we stray from the path, nudge us back. When we falter and become fickle in our commitment, awaken us to our faults and set us aright. Rekindle that passion within us to love you and your Son with all that we are and to honor you with all that we have.

We seek the welfare of Christians in lands where they are persecuted for following Jesus. Strengthen their resolve and may they reap rewards for their faithfulness.

May the nonviolent ways of Christ be a model for places around the world in which there is strife. Teach us peaceable ways of dealing with our differences and working together for the common good. May your peacemaking presence be recognized in Syria, Israel and Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq.

We are grateful for the signs of health returning to many who have been ill or undergone surgery. Continue to abide with them and offer your strong presence. Grant hope to those moving through difficult seasons in their lives. Encourage persons living with chronic mental health issues. Offer guidance to youth and young adults seeking to claim their precious identities in this world.

We lift our prayer as a way of honoring you, O God, and declaring our faith in your transforming power in our lives. Increase our faith and make us bold to express our great love of you and your Son through the actions of our lives. We unite our voices with Jesus as he taught us to pray....

ⁱ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 360.

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Rev. Don Shelby.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Dunn, *Try Giving Yourself Away: A Tonic for These Troubled Times* (Norwalk, Conn: C.R. Gibson, 1976).