

“LENT: A SEASON OF RISK – RISKING REJECTION”

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Mark 14:3-9

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This morning we come to a story that seems familiar but as we take a closer look, we realize that the story isn't perhaps what we thought it was. This is a story of the anointing of Jesus in a place called Bethany. Bethany was a town just outside of Jerusalem. It was a place Jesus was familiar with. It was the place where his close friends, Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus lived. Often when we think of the story of the anointing of Jesus, we remember the account told in John's gospel. In that account Jesus comes to dinner at the home of his friends. Martha served, like she always did, and Lazarus, the one whom Jesus had raised from the dead, was seated at the table with Jesus. Mary, and it's always Mary who does the unthinkable, takes a pound of costly perfume and spills it over Jesus' feet, then she wipes his feet with her hair. **It's a scene that is unimaginable in our context. Who does such a thing, it's scandalous!**

But in that telling of the story, the scandal isn't in Mary wiping Jesus' feet with her hair but rather that she had wasted this expensive perfume. Judas, the one who would betray Jesus, ironically complains, why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor? But Jesus sees through his hypocrisy and responds, leave her alone. She bought the perfume so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.

This is the version of the anointing at Bethany that most of us remember. **But the story we heard today is different, maybe it's the same story, but it's told differently.** The setting is still Bethany but the house belongs to a man named Simon the leper. Not a great name to have I suspect, but maybe he was known by that name because he once had been a leper and had been healed by Jesus. Was he the one of the ten who came back to thank Jesus for his healing? Was he so grateful that he invited Jesus to his home for dinner?

We don't know but what we do know is that while Jesus was there and while he was seated at the table, a woman, unnamed, came with an alabaster jar of costly ointment and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on Jesus' head. She was anointing Jesus. Some who were there, Judas is not named among them, were angry at what the woman had done. Why was the ointment wasted in this way? It could have been sold for more than 300 denarii and the money given to the poor. And they scolded her. But again, Jesus defends the unnamed woman. Leave her alone, she has performed a good service for me. Are you really concerned about the poor? You'll always have them with you, you can show kindness to them anytime you want, but you won't always have me. She gets it, she gets what you don't. She has anointed by body beforehand for burial. **Then Jesus concludes, truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.**

Our story is part of our Lenten series on the theme of risk. But the risk in our text this week isn't necessarily the risk Jesus takes, it's the risk that the unnamed woman takes in doing what she does. **She risks much to do what she does for Jesus.** All four gospels have a story of a woman who anoints Jesus. Matthew, John and our text from Mark, all locate the story in what we would call Holy Week, the final days of Jesus' life before his death. Those gospels locate the anointing in Bethany and while the woman is unnamed in Matthew and Mark, we know that she is identified in John's account as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. But Luke's gospel has an anointing story which is set much earlier in Jesus' ministry and takes place in Galilee, not Bethany. And in that story Jesus is having dinner at the home of a Pharisee. A woman, who is described as having lived a sinful life, comes with a jar of perfume. She weeps and her tears wet Jesus' feet. Then she wipes them with her hair and pours the perfume on his feet. **This time the anger isn't about the money that could have been used to serve the poor, but the reputation of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet.** She's a sinner and if Jesus were a prophet, he should have known that, that she was a sinner. But Jesus calls out the hypocrisy of the Pharisee, who is named Simon, for not showing hospitality to him while the so called sinful woman has poured out her love. **Jesus forgives the woman and says to her, your faith has saved you, go in peace.**

Maybe they are all the same story, told by the gospel writers in different ways for their different purposes, **but there are commonalities in all the stories. The women risk much to do what they do for Jesus.** Professor A.J. Levine, whose book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, we are using as a guide through this Lenten season, **points out that the women are single, they are alone. In each of the gospel accounts of the anointing, the women do not speak.** Only the men speak, whether it's Judas or Simon or some others who were there. And with the exception of John's account, where Mary is well known to Jesus, the other gospel accounts present someone who is unknown to Jesus and an outsider to the party. The unnamed woman in Mark's story is not a guest of Simon. **She simply shows up. Perhaps it was more common in that context for someone to be able to show up at a function like a dinner than it would be in our modern context, but it still carries a tremendous amount of risk.**

Have you ever shown up to something to which you were not invited? Maybe you were young, a high school student and you hear about a great party that someone is throwing, and your friend gets invited, but you don't. You want to go and your friend convinces you that you should go, that of course you're invited, it's just that the host never got around to telling you personally. So you decide to go, but you're never really sure and you never feel comfortable, you just can't enjoy being at the party until you meet the host. Maybe the host looked at you and said, hey Victor, it's great that you're here (not that this happened to me personally), but it's just as conceivable that the host could see you at the party and say, I don't remember inviting you! It's a risk.

It's a risk when you show up at a church for the first time. Will I be welcomed? Will I be ignored? Will I be judged because of the way I look or dress? Will I find a home, or will I be rejected? It's a risk. It's a risk to attend a Bible study if you've never done so. What if I don't know as much as the others? What if I say something stupid? What if Victor asks me a question that I can't answer? **Sometimes just showing up is a risk!**

And of course, for our unnamed woman in the story, the risk goes far beyond just showing up, and without an invitation. She shows up to do something completely unexpected, scandalous. She pours expensive perfume, ointment, on Jesus' head. Who does this kind of thing! **She's rejected, she's condemned, she's vilified. It's just so unexpected. And anytime something is unexpected, you can pretty much expect pushback, even rejection.**

I appreciate Lynn sharing her story of risk with us today. **It's risky to do something unconventional. It invites scrutiny, often incorrect assumptions based on incomplete knowledge. It can mark you and label you.** I'm glad she stuck with doing something she's passionate about, something that helps people become closer and more open to Jesus. That's always a good indicator of whether what you're doing is worth the risk, **does it help people get closer to Jesus? If it does, you're probably on solid ground.**

And speaking of Jesus, you want to know what's risky business? Following Jesus. Following Jesus in this day and age, in our present context, is risky business. **You want to risk rejection, tell people you follow Jesus,** tell people outside the church, outside your circle of faith friends. My wife Sophie tells me that when she started at her job at the BC Cancer Agency her co-workers asked her what does your husband do? He's a minister, she said. Oh really? Is he like the minister of health or the minister of education? Is he in government? No, he's a minister in a church, in a Presbyterian church. Oh, okay. I think it was the Presbyterian part that really threw them! **It gets you labeled and judged to say you're a Christian, a follower of Jesus. Do people know you follow Jesus?**

Our culture is way more comfortable with spiritual teachers, self-help gurus, social role models and justice advocates than we are with Messiahs or Saviours. Our culture doesn't like messiahs any more than the Romans did way back in Jesus' time. We can treat Jesus in the same way that Simon the leper and his fellow dinner attendees did. We can treat him as an honoured guest, as someone to be admired, a great name to throw around our social circles. **Or we can do what the unnamed woman did, we can worship him. We can anoint him as our Lord and King.** We can follow Jesus in ways that don't only pay lip service about the poor, or the addicted, the homeless, the marginalized, but truly advocate, really care for those who Jesus always seemed to care for. **We can stand up and speak up for those who have risked and never found welcome, those who have risked and been rejected too often and for too long.** We can work for change, for welcome, for inclusion, for love for all who bear the image of our Creator.

And doing that comes with risks, following Jesus always does. **But Jesus will stand with us, as Jesus stood with the unnamed woman.** He knew that she knew what the others didn't understand, couldn't comprehend. She knew where Jesus was headed and she showed him how much she loved him. Why? We don't know. But we do know what Jesus said about her. Wherever the good news is proclaimed, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her. **We don't know her name, but we're still telling her story thousands of years later. We're still telling the story of the one who risked so much, risked rejection, risked humiliation, risked anger and outrage, because she knew who Jesus was and needed to acknowledge that in the time of Jesus' need.** She risked so much because Jesus risked everything. **What would you be willing to risk so that when the good news is proclaimed, in your family, in your circle of friends or co-workers, in this fellowship of the church, that what you have done would be told in remembrance of you?**

Thanks be to God, Amen.