

1/15/17 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“THE POWER TO DO: THE WOMAN WHO ANOINTED JESUS”

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Text: Mark 14:3-9

This story I have just read is one of the most remarkable to me in all of Luke's Gospel. I am frankly astonished at the way Jesus responds here to an incredibly awkward situation. I also sense that it reflects something very profound not only about Jesus but about a possibility that is resonant in every one of us. Perhaps we need a little background to understand the situation more fully. By this time, Jesus had created quite a stir in Palestine as an original and utterly vital holy man. All sorts of people were attracted to him-rich and poor folk, educated and illiterate, highly respectable, and also the genuine riffraff at the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

One evening Jesus is being entertained by one of the leading citizens of Jerusalem, and while he was at table, something utterly astonishing occurred. A woman of the streets, a person described as a notorious sinner, which meant quite simply that she was a well-known prostitute, broke into that scene and began to pour expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and then to weep copiously and to wipe his feet with her hair. Now this action shattered every social custom of that day. This one was not an invited guest into that home. And in that day, women did not intrude into the company of men who were sitting at table for dinner. In fact, not even the wives were oftentimes included. In terms of sheer emotion, here was as tasteless and vulgar a show of affection as you could possibly, possibly imagine. To be perfectly honest, if I had been Jesus in that situation, I would have been utterly horrified. My first thought would have been "What on earth are people going to think? Are they not going to wonder how I ever even came to know a woman of this sort? Isn't this going to be absolutely devastating to my reputation as a rabbi and a holy man?"

Jesus had every reason to be very, very embarrassed. However, what makes this story so remarkable to me is the way Jesus responded. Instead of worrying about himself and his reputation, Jesus immediately jumped to the defense of this woman and began to celebrate what must have happened in her life that prompted this particular kind of behavior. Now we're not told in detail what had occurred previously to this woman; but, obviously, something had taken place that was absolutely life-changing. We can only imagine that the great love and mercy of God had become an event for her through the gracious ministry of Jesus. Somehow, she had been given to see that God's goodness was bigger than all her badness, that the one who stands behind really is, in fact, one whose property is always to have mercy. This woman had come to sense in the depths of her being that there is nothing we humans can do to make God love us any more than God already loves us, and there is nothing we can do to make God stop loving us. She had experienced a breakthrough into the very heart of God, and that had changed everything about her life-the way she understood herself, the way she understood both the past and the future, and it also affected how she could begin to live her life in that moment. She had been seized by this wonderful sense that God was more interested in her future than in her past; and, therefore, she had come to give back to the one who had opened her eyes to this deepest truth the gratitude that was appropriate for such an inbreak of grace.

Now what had happened to her was more important to Jesus than his own reputation. In fact, he was so full of joy at the fact that this woman had discovered the wondrous grace of God that he was quick to celebrate her wonderful change of life rather than to be concerned about himself. After all, he had come into this world by his own self-definition as a physician-someone whose purpose was to heal the sick rather than to condemn them. And his reaction in this very awkward situation was exactly like the way he had responded to the tax collector Zacchaeus, who had also discovered God's unconditional love and allowed that to change him profoundly. Jesus celebrated whenever true salvation had come into the life of another.

The insight on which Jesus built his life in ministry is in fact the loveliest truth in all the world. To put it quite simply, life is gift. Birth is windfall. None of us earned our way into this world by what we did or did not do. It was given to us out of pure generosity and out of everlasting mercy. This truth in the depth of all being is the secret of all secrets in the Christian vision of reality. As the ancient hymn in Philippians puts it: "Jesus made himself of no reputation." And he was able to do that because he had already been given a name that was greater than anything else in the world. In other words, Jesus understood that life is given to us as a gracious gift. Our worth is not something we have to earn or to deserve, and it was this sense of life as gift that not only enabled Jesus to minister as Jesus did, but it's how he was able to open other people's eyes to the great generosity that lies at the heart of God that is, in fact, the greatest saving truth.

Jesus, at the time of his baptism, realized that he was by the grace of God the beloved child of God, and what was true of Jesus at that moment is true of every one of us as well. This is exactly what this woman had discovered and accounts for the incredible change that came over her life.

I had a friend once who had struggled for years with feelings of inadequacy. He had tried so hard to earn a sense of worth by out-achieving and out-competing other people. But every time, he told me, it turned out to be just like cotton candy. Achievements lasted for just a moment and then turned into nothing but air in the depth of his being. After years of seeking to earn his own salvation, one day in a hotel room, he finally cried out in sheer anguish just like the Philippian jailer, "O God, what must I do, what must I do to be saved?" And he told me that to his great amazement, as he uttered his words, it was as if a hand began to write something on the wall across from his bed. And what the hand wrote was "Nothing, nothing at all. It comes with the territory." And it dawned on him that what he had so tried to earn was, in fact, a gift freely given if he would simply accept it. He said that as he had what Thomas Merton calls a breakthrough to the already, that an old image that he had read years before came back to his mind—that of an individual riding on an ox looking for an ox. Here was somebody anxiously surveying the whole terrain to try to find something, when all along what that he most wanted was right underneath him. This is the great truth of being saved by grace. We do not earn our worth by what we do. It was given to us by the great generosity of God at the moment of our conception. And, therefore, in this passage, it's clear to me that Jesus opened up the way for this "notorious sinner" to learn the wonder of what it means that life is gift and birth is windfall. She came that day to give thanks to the one who had opened her eyes to the deepest of all truths. To do what she had the power to do to praise the one who gave her life.

When we recognize the immeasurable gifts of God—that life is a gift. Have we done what we have the power to do to praise our God?

I invite you in this moment to ponder the fact that God loves you in exactly the same way that God loves every human being that God has called out of nothing into being. You already are the beloved child of God, not by virtue of what you have made of yourself, but by virtue of what God has made of you out of pure and amazing grace. I invite you, in fact, I plead with you, let God's grace be the basis of how you feel about yourself.

O God of everlasting mercy, help each of us to break through to what is already true: We are beloved in your sight. Help us then to respond with what we have the power to do. Amen.