

“Oil”

Sermon from Mark 4:1-11

Given Sunday, April 10, 2022

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to be observed in two days' time. The chief priests and religious scholars were looking for some excuse to arrest Jesus and kill him. But they said, “Not during the festival, or the people may riot.”

While Jesus was in Bethany reclining at table in the house of Simon, who was afflicted with leprosy, a woman entered carrying an alabaster jar made of expensive aromatic nard. After breaking the jar, she began to pour the perfume on his head. Some said to themselves indignantly, “What is the point of this extravagant waste of perfume? It could have been sold for over three hundred silver pieces, and the money given to those in need!” They were infuriated with her.

But Jesus said, “Let her alone. Why do you criticize her? She has done me a kindness. You will always have poor people among you, and you can do them good whenever you want, but you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed my body and is preparing it for burial. The truth is, wherever the good news is proclaimed throughout the world, what she has done will be told in her memory.”

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests to hand Jesus over to them. Hearing what he had to say, they were jubilant and promised to give him money. Then Judas started looking for an opportune moment to betray Jesus.

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I don't know if I've ever uttered this sentence before in conversation, let alone to start a sermon, but: did you see the game Monday night?

It was the last game of the NCAA men's college basketball tournament, pitting North Carolina against the University of Kansas. Both of these teams have legendary status. In the bleachers was Roy Williams, who coached KU from 1988 until 2003, 15 years, and then became head coach at UNC for the next 18 years, retiring just last year. So this was supposed to be an exciting game for lots of reasons, and it lived up to the hype.

I mean, I only saw the last 15 minutes, but in that time the game was close. It had not been close early on. At halftime North Carolina had a 15-point lead. But KU caught up, and in those last minutes the lead kept alternating, and then with thirty-eight seconds left in the game, when KU was ahead by just one point, a North Carolina player, Armando Bacot, fell. He'd sprained his ankle two nights earlier, but played this game anyway - and been the leading scorer this night. But he jumped and when he came down he landed at a bad angle, some are saying now the floor was faulty, whatever the cause, he re-injured his ankle, and crumpled in pain.

And the announcers all seemed to know what KU should have done in that moment. Here's how they called it. They said: "He's hurt; he is hurt, he slipped, and he is still down. Up ahead - he's

hurting - they're not attacking. He's hobbling on one leg down the court."

Kansas had the ball, and they had a sudden advantage. The other team was down one man. Kansas had a wide open shot. And they didn't take it. Jalen Wilson slowed his dribbling down until the referee called a time-out.

And the announcer said, "I am shocked Kansas didn't attack." He said, "I feel terribly for Bacot, but you gotta take advantage of that situation. Take care of the injured player, although, boy, you gotta punish people when you get an opportunity like that."

It would have been a kindness in a regular basketball game, for the team with the advantage to slow down and make sure the other guy gets care. But in the final game of the championship tournament with seconds left of the clock, it was unthinkable. The stakes were too high for that kind of effort. That's what made it so beautiful.

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In a whole different world, with much higher stakes, Werner Reich was 15 years old. He was fifteen years old and he'd never seen a card trick. He was 15 years old and Jewish in 1943, in Yugoslavia, when he was arrested by the gestapo and beaten up and loaded into a cattle car and shipped to a Nazi extermination camp.

By the time he arrived at Auschwitz, he said, that camp had already murdered more than a million people and sent them, through the chimney, into the sky. He said when the people in his car arrived, they were told they would be at the camp for exactly six months, and then they would leave, through the chimneys.

He was assigned to a bed with five other men. They were made to sleep in alternating directions so whichever way you slept, he said, you always had somebody's feet in your face.

And he remembers coming back from a work assignment one afternoon, climbing up to his bed, and finding one of his bunkmates, Mr. Levine, already there, sitting up, with a deck of cards. He didn't know what was happening. He said finding a deck of cards at Auschwitz was like finding a gorilla in your bathroom.

Mr. Levine smiled at him, fanned the cards out in front of him, invited him to pick one.

And he did. And Mr. Levine did a trick with it. He performed magic with it. And Werner was in awe.

And then, Mr. Levine told Werner how he did it. He explained the trick, step by step.

And Werner remembered. He remembered every word. He says from that day on, he practiced that trick. He didn't have a deck of cards, of course, but he reviewed the steps in his mind, every day.

Three weeks later he was sent to another camp, then another. He worked. He was made to go on a death march - 60,000 people set out - 15,000 of them died along the way. At the next camp, in Austria, he slept next to a dead man just to get his moldy teaspoon of bread. He was 17 years old and 64 pounds when his camp was liberated.

He eventually made it to England, found work. After about a year, he says, he bought himself a deck of cards. For the first time, he tried the trick with actual cards in his hands. And it worked, he said it worked beautifully. He began doing the trick for friends, and they loved it. He began learning new tricks.

Years later, he found out, that Mr. Levine, Herbert Levine, had been a famous magician in Germany. The SS officers knew of him, so they snuck him a piece of string, some dice, a deck of cards. He taught the trick to some of the officers, too. That was the trade they made with him. I wonder how badly they needed that kindness.

Werner Reich tells his story in schools these days. He credits his survival to that afternoon with Mr. Levine. He says, "If you ever know somebody who needs help, if you know somebody who is scared, be kind to them. Give them advice, give them a hug, teach them a card trick. Whatever you are going to do, it's going to be hope for them. And if you do it at the right time, it will enter their heart, and it will be with them wherever they go, forever."

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A kindness at the right time is the story of our scripture for today. It is an act of beauty in a brutal world. We don't tell it like it is very often; we romanticize the details because we tell the story with a redemptive end in mind already. But the beauty of this anointing is all the more meaningful because it is rooted in a story of brutality. The kindness of this woman is all the more striking because its backdrop is such cruelty. We heard it in the reading: at the beginning, the leaders and scholars are looking for a way to kill Jesus. At the end, a disciple goes to them, ready to give them just what they're looking for. In the middle of that scheming, a stranger comes, offers a brief respite from the attacks of the empire, and Jesus says, "thank you."

Others around say this is no time for extravagance. This is no place for a gesture of generosity. There is serious, life-and-death business to tend to here. And Jesus says, "This is exactly the time. This is absolutely the place." This is who we are to be for one another. We cannot be shaped by the cruelty of our context. We have to offer something different.

Maybe you don't have many moments that feel as high-stakes as those. But we never really know each other's worlds.

At the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, or EMO, one of the programs they offer is called ROSS - the acronym stands for Russian Oregon Settlement Services. I was on a zoom call two weeks ago where a smaller committee of EMO was hearing a report from the director of ROSS. They're currently in the process

of changing their name to SOSS -, S-O-S-S, for Slavic Oregon Settlement Services.

In part, they're making the change because the new name better reflects the scope, the reach of what they offer and the diversity of people who come to them for services. They'd been talking about the name change for a while. But it became urgent after Russia began attacking Ukraine and, in turn, people in Oregon began attacking these folks at the Settlement Services program. Sending hate mail. Posting violent messages to them. Calling them with death threats. Because it is their job to offer assistance to those who are coming, vulnerable, from a part of the world where the leader acts out brutally, cruelly, against everyone. And often anything connected to brutality is met with more of the same. It doesn't matter that at SOSS, their work is precisely the opposite of war-making.

She said they spend their days offering listening and healing sessions for immigrants who cannot reach their family, who do not know what has become of their home, who are not welcome in their new neighborhoods either. The staff - they are all immigrants themselves - they come from their own trauma, and they spend their days hearing this trauma, and they go back to their offices and are met with more trauma. And they are breaking.

And someone on the call said, "What can we do?" And the woman telling us this story, the woman who oversees the Settlement

Services and this staff under such stress, she said, “You invited me here. You’re letting me talk about it. That is such kindness.”

It’s not all, of course. Slowing down a dribble, teaching a card trick, pouring some perfume, hearing a story. It’s not all. But is is a way of offering beauty where it’s not expected. There’s a reason this story is tucked into our larger narrative. And it’s so that we might remember. So that we might do the same.

PRAYER

One way to love someone is to receive their gifts.

That's what Steve Garnass-Holmes says in answer to his own question, "Why does Jesus let her do this?" He lets her, because he loves her. Whether or not he knows her, he loves her. And one way to love someone is to receive their gifts.

So much of what we bring is imperfect.

But our tradition is filled with stories of people who offer what they can: Christmas: little drummer boy. Good Friday: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.

I have to believe that if this woman came to Jesus with a dandelion, and smudged a yellow heart on his hand, he would have called it the same.

This is kindness done to Jesus, but he offers back the same to her. She has done what she could. She has done me a kindness. In some translations, she has done a beautiful thing.

BENEDICTION

Jesus covers for this woman nicely, but let's admit:
it was an awkward moment, no?
Why does he let her do that to him?

For the same reason
when your kid gives you a picture they drew
you put it on your fridge.
One way to love someone is to receive their gifts.
No judging, no positioning yourself.

Just receive with humility what others have to offer.
The awkward gesture, the insufficient talent,
the little crayon drawing that is someone's life.

After all,
God accepts your whole life, delighted,
and puts it on her fridge.