

*Between Two Anointings*

Mark 1:1-11; Mark 14:1-16

Whitefish UMC

Palm/Passion Sunday, April 5, 2009

- † “In John Grisham’s novel, *The Firm*, an exceptionally gifted young man fresh out of law school lands a dream job with one of the most respected firms in the country. The partners in the firm greet him royally, wining and dining him, buying a house for him and his young wife, lavishing him with praise.
- † It was a glorious start to his law career! But within months it becomes clear that most of those partners are criminals with connections to organized crime. The firm itself hired thugs to keep the partners in line, and the cozy house they had bought for the young couple turned out to be loaded with hidden microphones that had recorded all their private conversations, their lovemaking, everything.
- † Given how things turned out, it’s hard to imagine that in later years this man or his wife would nonetheless look back fondly on those early heady days when the firm first hired him! It did not turn out at all well, and so there would be nothing good to look back on.
- † So also with Palm Sunday: there are so many conflicting angles to all this. In fact, even this very story ends on an anticlimactic note. Jesus enters the temple but by then the party had already stopped. There was no royal welcome for Jesus at the house of God and so, after peering around at this and that for a little while, Jesus and the twelve disciples silently slip **out** of Jerusalem with no fanfare whatsoever.

- † The next morning Jesus re-enters the city, but this time not only does no one greet him joyfully, Jesus himself tears into the place with a full head of steam, driving out moneychangers from the temple and generally behaving in ways that make a lot of folks hopping mad at him.
- † The Palm Sunday party was over almost as soon as it began. So is it right to look back fondly on this day? Given what happened in subsequent days, isn't celebrating Palm Sunday a little like celebrating the anniversary of an abusive marriage that ended in divorce?
- † Even if a person did note the anniversary of a failed marriage, wouldn't the memory of that bring regret rather than joy, a disappointed frown rather than a fond smile?"
- † Now there's a thought to ruin Palm Sunday! That's what I observed when I read this reflection by Scott Hoezee in a blog for Palm Sunday worship. And I wonder....
- † Recently I had occasion to celebrate my parents' anniversary, March 17<sup>th</sup>. They were married near the end of World War II on the spur of the moment. And although they were married for thirty-seven years, it wasn't always an easy or particularly happy marriage.
- † My parents' marriage wasn't physically abusive, but they fought a lot about money and where we kids would go to church, among other things. They divorced twenty-six years ago, when I was in my early thirties, and it wasn't a good or friendly divorce.
- † When we were growing up, though, my sister Penny and I would look forward to their anniversary, because my mom always made a big deal out decorating the house, making special cakes, and lime jello,

marshmallow, cottage cheese surprise for St. Patrick's Day and their anniversary.

- † My sister Penny has been dead for almost six years now, but one of my goals is to help her daughter, our niece Anya, remember her mom's childhood. So on March 17<sup>th</sup> I called her up and told her about our parents' anniversary celebrations and how much fun they were, at least in the early days.
- † That said, I guess I disagree with Scott Hoezee. We are meant to celebrate Palm Sunday, even though it didn't turn out very well—at least in one sense. And I think, along with John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, that the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem wasn't necessarily the same as the one that shouted “crucify him” on Good Friday—despite what our “passion plays” represent.
- † But there is more to this day than a parade, more to this coming week than spring break for Whitefish schools, and so we're going to consider what might have happened on Wednesday of the week we call holy, the story of the woman who anointed Jesus.
- † At first glance, she doesn't seem very important—she doesn't even have a name for heaven's sake. But if we look more closely, we find that she has the utmost significance.
- † In their book, *The Last Week*, Borg and Crossan **contrast** this unnamed woman who anoints Jesus with Judas, who immediately leaves the scene in order to betray Jesus.
- † Borg and Crossan call this woman “the first Christian,” the first to believe Jesus when he spoke of his coming suffering and death, and the first to take it so seriously that she went into action. That's why

she anointed his body, while the disciples were still consumed with power plays and questions.

- † The “stunningly extraordinary accolade” Jesus bestows on her (Whenever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her”) indicates, Borg and Crossan write, that she is “the perfect disciple leader and is contrasted with Judas, who represents the worst one possible.”
- † Megan McKenna provides a wonderful meditation on this woman and her actions, and on her heart as well, as she offers Jesus tender and loving attention and lavish generosity in her gift of ointment worth a year’s wages. The same people who fail to offer these things are the first to criticize her for doing so, when the money presumably could have been better spent on the poor.
- † Most of us who have heard this episode remember the argument that ensues rather than the beauty of the woman’s gesture. In fact we’ve sided with the disciples, haven’t we?
- † But McKenna says that the men in the house miss the point: “Jesus is the poor,” she writes; “he is the poorest man in that house.” He is an innocent man facing a brutal execution, like so many of the world’s people who have no hope, and his friends will mostly abandon him.
- † McKenna turns the argument in the text around, saying that “Jesus is telling them that what they want to do for him, they should do for the poor. Mercy is their sign of devotion.” She goes on to ask, “when have we ever lavished mercy and justice and healing worth a year’s wages on those in need?”
- † We know that the companions of Jesus—the official twelve especially—mostly missed the point in their travels throughout his

- ministry. But this woman emerged from the shadows to be “remembered always as aligned with Jesus.”
- † In Hebrew, the word “remember” means to put back together as it was originally. In this dramatic scene, the contrast is striking, as McKenna observes: “while Judas, the disciple, is handing Jesus over for money, the woman, also a disciple (unofficially of course) is ‘wasting’ a year’s wages on perfumed oil to anoint him.”
  - † Here on the edge of Holy Week, we face the meaning of Jesus’ death. Mark doesn’t avoid the reality of the agonizing death of Jesus and the abandonment he experiences at the end.
  - † And we realize that Jesus is with us in our every moment of abandonment, our every moment of suffering and loss. In his book *What Jesus Meant*, Garry Wills comes to Good Friday. He writes “Dark and mysterious as is the whole matter of the Incarnation and the Passion, perhaps a single thing can help us think of them.”
  - † And then Wills tells a simple personal story. His little son woke up one night crying. He had had a bad dream, a nightmare. When Wills asked what was wrong, the little boy said that a nun in his school had told the children that they would end up in hell if they sinned.
  - † “Am I going to hell?” the little boy asked his father. Wills writes, “There is not an ounce of heroism in my natures, but I instantly announced what any father, any parent would: ‘All I can say is that if you’re going there, I’m going with you.’”
  - † We talk a lot about how God defeats death in this Holiest of weeks. But the real message is that Jesus refused to avoid death. Jesus’ cry of abandonment from the cross is real and ought not to be glossed over by the Easter story to come.

- † It's a true cry of desperation that echoes the truth of the pains we experience in our lives. Jesus reflects real life. And in our own real lives, when we face pain and loss, we have the example of Jesus to follow. And Jesus refused to fight inflicted pain by inflicting pain. He refused to overcome injustice by offering retribution of his own.
- † Margaret Fraley writes that we must do everything we can to end the suffering caused by the kind of injustice that killed Jesus and tries to kill God's dream for our world:
- † "...the kind of suffering that does not have to be; that cries out for an end not in death but in change. Christianity is therefore not a religion obsessed with necromancy and pain. It is a religion of resistance and hope.
- † The point of the cross is not finally suffering and death; it is , rather, that a relationship holds. There is love stronger than death....The God of Christians is not an arbitrary ruler who demands the price of suffering and death, but a God who makes possible all of our loves, as well as our resistance to evil."
- † As we consider again the unnamed woman, "the first Christian, the model leader and companion," the upper room is once again prepared. As we come forward, let us consider which disciple we wish to be—the one who offers our lives to Jesus and God's kingdom—or the one who betrays him for money, perhaps power, and the way of the world.
- † For we remember, but back together again as it was originally, the night in which Jesus ate with his disciples and gave himself up for us....
- † Amen.

Sources:

John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, *The Last Week*. New York, 2006.

Kate Huey, "Into Jerusalem," <http://i.ucc.org>

Scott Hoezee, <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek>

Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant*. New York, 2006.