

Deuteronomy 15:1-11
Mark 14:1-11
March 7, 2010

Uction Umbrage

Apparently some men are sick and tired of tuity fruity syrupy scents in the shower. Apparently some men have had it with flower power women's soaps; lavender this and gardenia that. They take umbrage with sweetly tweety feminine unctions that are always orange, yellow and pink. They want to take back the shower. The Dial Soap Company is tapping in to this male dissatisfaction with feminine balms and perfumery and they have developed the Dial for Men shower products. In commercials full of buffoonery that imitate the worse of beer advertisements, the Dial for Men products urge men to be manly and to take back the shower. After all men should smell like men.

It is Wednesday of Holy Week in the Gospel of Mark and just like in the commercials, we have some folks complaining about perfume scents. They are annoyed and they are taking umbrage with the undulating odor of unction flowing forth from an alabaster jar. An unnamed woman was anointing Jesus with a very costly ointment. She was pouring it on his head. She was lavishing him with

extravagance and the scent was filling the entire house, and suddenly all eyes were on Jesus who is drenched with cologne.

It is Wednesday of Holy week in the Gospel of Mark and this is the third sermon in a series of six on the last week of Jesus' life. Next Sunday I will preach on Thursday, the Passover, meal and Jesus' arrest. Michelle Hwang, the nominee for Associate Pastor has agreed to preach on Friday two Sunday's from today. We are as a congregation following the pattern of the Book called The Last Week by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan which analyses Mark's day by approach of describing Holy Week.

The complainers are taking umbrage with the act of extravagance. They are perturbed, they say, because the ointment of nard could have been sold for three hundred denarii which was the equivalent of about one years wage for a laborer in first century Palestine. They make a very good point; the unction could have been sold and the money could have been given to the poor. Jesus however, responds by defending the woman. He reminds them all that the poor will always be with them; he however is soon to be executed. Jesus moves beyond defending the anointer, he praises her for her act of generosity.

In some ways, this is an odd little story and it is told with different shades in each of the four Gospels. One of the perplexing details of this event is that Jesus, at first blush, seems to be brushing off the needs of the poor. I mean here we have the teacher, prophet and Son who has spent a good portion of his ministry advocating for the poor, the excluded, the downtrodden and the oppressed; and in this telling he seems to be dismissing their plight.

This scene from the Gospel of Mark is an intimate and moving moment. The unnamed woman breaks open a very costly jar of perfume and anoints Jesus head in front of all the people who are gathered for dinner in the home of Simon the Leper. OK there is a clue there. Jesus is actually at a dinner at the home of a man whom Jewish Law considers ritually unclean. Jesus has no use for customs that excluded the sick from God's presence so he worked to heal their bodies and their souls. He healed their souls by loving them and treating them with compassion. Jesus is still spending the nights in Bethany a town a mile or two outside of Jerusalem, because Jerusalem is not safe. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest him.

This anointing in a Leper's home in a secret safe house by a mystery woman is perhaps just a tad more intimacy than the first century and the twenty first century crowd can handle. Jesus likely would have been reclining in front of a very low table, on a cushion propping himself up with his left elbow. She is massaging ointment into his hair in front of everyone. Maybe the whole scene was a bit too personal? The dinner and anointing take place the night before Jesus' arrest and from this moment on, Jesus is a marked man. His body is now ready for death. She does now what no one will be able to do on Friday Night after the cross, because of Jewish Custom. Jesus Body was removed from the cross late in the afternoon. Sunset actually marked the beginning of the Sabbath and you weren't permitted to handle dead bodies on the Sabbath. The unnamed woman prepares him for burial.

Borg and Crossan point out that Jesus has high praise for the unnamed perfumer. He predicts that her act will always be remembered. She lavishes extravagance upon Jesus and she is therefore a model disciple. She spends money on Jesus, while Judas prepares to take a bribe to betray. The unnamed woman is a leader. Judas is a failure. Of all the people in house of Simon, the

unnamed woman is the only one who truly believes what Jesus has taught – that he will be arrested, that he will face torture, that he will be killed. She sees what others cannot. She understands that discipleship is the way of the cross.

I agree with Borg and Crossan that the unnamed woman is an example for us. Jesus clearly holds her up as one to be imitated. At the heart of her faith is an act of extravagance for Jesus. She understands his sacrifice. We are in the Season of Lent, the season of readying our hearts for Easter and part of Lent is to be extravagant towards God. We do not have Jesus among us in physical form. It is not possible for us to literally anoint him. We can do nothing physical for him; but what we can do is worship. Our worship during Lent could be deeper, we could actually spend our weeks and our Sunday mornings getting our hearts and minds around worship before we attend. We could prepare so that our beings are not preoccupied when get here.

In the church I served as youth director, while I was in seminary, the pastor resigned to go back to school to get his PHD. For about five months, I provided the preaching after he left. There was an elderly woman in that church who said little, but always had a

kind short word for me after church. She was in her 90's standing a crooked five foot tall. I had known her for about two years. One Sunday her son was visiting and came to church with her and asked me if I knew about her ministry. From my youthful perspective, she looked well past retired to me and I confessed I did not know about her ministry. "My mother," the son told me, "gets up at 6:00 AM every Sunday and starts praying for you and the choir. She prays that God will be in your words and your manner. She prays that people will receive it. She prays for the worship service and the congregation. She prays for four hours." I was quite startled by this disclosure. I didn't really know what to say. I mumbled some form of thank you. Let me tell you, I needed prayer. My sermons were rudimentary; but they did get better. Maybe that's the kind of extravagance we should be offering in Lent?

We could resist the temptation to daydream. We could increase our frequency of worship. We could add more times of prayer to our week. We could pray deeper. We could read the Bible. Our honoring of God could be more lavish. Could we imagine our relationship with God being so close that we could actually touch the Holy? We could rub some good stuff in God's hair.

It's goofy; but some people actually think that Jesus is dismissing the poor when he says "you always have the poor with you,..... but you do not always have me." First of all Jesus worked tirelessly for three years to show the world the radical nature of God's love. At every turn he strived to show the people that the cruel oppression of the Romans and the faithless collusion of the way rich in Israel was not part of God's intention for the world or Israel. The High Priests of Israel and the wealthy aristocrats bastardized the practice of Judaism so they could maintain their wealth and power. They were trapped by their privilege; that's the price of collaboration. Their governmental and economic practices crushed the common people of Israel and they polluted the faith to do it. The Son of Man, The Human Being – Jesus was sent by God to teach true faith and God's fairness.

When Jesus says you shall always have the poor with you; any of his close followers and any proficient student of Hebrew scripture would know that he is quoting Deuteronomy 15. Do not be hard hearted or tight fisted toward your needy neighbor...give liberally and be ungrudging when you do, for on this account the Lord will bless you.....and verse 11, since there will never cease to be some in need

on the earth **“I therefore command you”** “Open your hand to the poor and the needy neighbor in your land. End of quote – and before we get all American about helping only your local neighbor please remember that Jesus reinterpreted neighbor as meaning anybody anywhere who needs our help; Chile and Haiti included. Jesus was not dismissing the poor or their desperate situation. Since he knew he was dying for the poor and the poor in spirit; he allowed himself to be anointed for his crucifixion. His anointing was in fact on behalf of all the poor and poor in spirit in every time and place.

The organization Bread for The World reports that there are about a Billion people in the world who go hungry. Just three years ago it was about 890 million but the recession has been unkind to people on every continent.

Each year, 3 million children under-five die because they are undernourished.¹ Far more children live with undernutrition than die from it. For infants and young children, the effects of chronic malnutrition in the early years of life are largely irreversible.

In the United States, over 49 million people—including 16.7 million children—live in households that struggle to put food on the

table. That means one in seven households in the U.S. are living with hunger or are at risk of hunger.²

But we CAN end hunger.

We have the means. The financial costs to end hunger are relatively slight. The United Nations Development Program estimates that the basic health and nutrition needs of the world's poorest people could be met for an additional \$13 billion a year. Bread for the World points out that Animal lovers in the United States and Europe spend more than that on pet food each year.

Part of Lent is to be extravagant in Jesus' name towards the poor. Supporting the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering generously has many parallels to cracking open an alabaster jar full of cologne and massaging it into the hair of Jesus. The Presbyterian Hunger Program, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and The Presbyterian Self Development of People program are all funded by One Great Hour of Sharing. The sweet smell of generosity is pleasing to God.