

The Cast | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

The Anointing (Message in a Bottle)

Matthew 26.1-16

April 4, 2017

When Jesus had finished all these words, He said to His disciples,² "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be handed over for crucifixion."³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas;⁴ and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him.⁵ But they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people."

⁶ Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper,⁷ a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it on His head as He reclined at the table.⁸ But the disciples were indignant when they saw this, and said, "Why this waste?"⁹ "For this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor."¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me.¹¹ "For you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me.¹² "For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial.¹³ "Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests¹⁵ and said, "What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?" And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him.¹⁶ From then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Jesus.

Each week...over the last few months we meet one of the Cast Members in the Gospels... the many, many people who relate to Jesus Christ in the course of His life... We've seen how, He, the main Character, deals with people...And we keep discovering MORE about Him...which has been the goal of the series.

At this point in the story, Jesus is in a suburb of the capital city, Jerusalem...and as He nears Jerusalem, He arrives at His goal, His life's mission is to die...in Jerusalem. He was NOT a religious innovator or a pioneer of NEW religious teachings – HIS REAL ACHIEVEMENT (and a lot of people miss this) but His real accomplishment is His death...and AT THIS POINT IN THE STORY that fact flares up.

AND if people TODAY can miss that...and if modern people misconstrue Jesus Christ to be a teacher of love and forgiveness...if people fail to see His death and resurrection as His main

purpose, well it was also NOT UNDERSTOOD by His original followers... The disciples are NOT SEEING IT.

He's telling them...repeatedly...but they're so wired to think of Messiah as conqueror that they just can't imagine how He could conquer by dying.

AND there's a woman...a disciple...who gets it. And because she gets it (and no one else DOES) she looks a little...eccentric...a little over-the-top...overzealous.

What happens when YOU get it...and the people around you DON'T? What happens when the real core meaning of Jesus Christ's coming DAWNS on you and you see, feel, and embrace it...WHEN IT EMBRACES YOU...and the people around you don't? This scene is a gripping case-study in THAT. It's enthralling.

Let's look at: 1) The Combustible Situation 2) The Spark 3) Pouring Oil On the Fire

This episode is recorded in Matthew, Mark and John and putting them all together, we get a fuller picture of the events and characters.

The opening paragraph paints an ominous picture. The Rabbi tells His students once again, VERY clearly that He goes to Jerusalem to die by crucifixion. They still think this is some sort of metaphor.

There's a gathering of the clergymen (priests and elders) and it's NOW more than casual remarks; it's a very official judicial meeting and they're no longer asking "IF" this Jesus of Nazareth has to go but "HOW? And WHEN?"...and by the end of the text they have procured the services of a co-conspirator.

AND...it's Passover...AND it's Jerusalem...and the city is swollen with pilgrims...ten times its normal size!

So...it's a combustible moment...and you know: it only takes a spark to get a fire going! And here it comes...in the form of a little dinner party in the suburb of Bethany (two miles from Jerusalem).

With all this kindling and dry wood and flammable liquid piled up...all ready to flare up in a second (combustible moment!), the disciples gather in the home of Simon, a leper who had been healed by Jesus Christ...for a reception dinner.

A woman comes...John identifies her as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus...and she carries a bottle of very expensive oil/perfume. Mark says to access the contents the bottle had to be

broken...like an old-fashioned piggy-bank (or an ampule for drugs) ... NOT re-sealable...once opened it had to be used...

And in John's account the estimated value (12.5) of this sealed bottle was a year's wages. VERY EXTRAVAGANT!

And her action...is the spark that seems to ignite all this combustible stuff. The men think she's a "drama-queen" and all unglued and over-blown...and pouring out this extremely high-priced cologne... WHY?

And now we have the flash...it ignites discussion and more. "The disciples were indignant" - they were incensed! They were practical men and "this is just a big WASTE...when we could give this huge amount of money to do some real good! Help the poor!"

All the disciples felt this way but in John's account it was their treasurer, Judas Iscariot, who led the charge (12.4-6).

It may have been the final straw for Judas...maybe he thought, "Enough! How can this be a real rabbi if He allows this delirious devotion to Him? I WANT OUT!" And Judas does GET out...makes a deal for 30 pieces of silver (a stark contrast: Mary's boundless love for Jesus Christ and Judas' very calculated deal for himself).

But...again...ALL the disciples were thinking this way (amazing how negatively the disciples are portrayed in their own writings...strange, if they were writing these stories to somehow benefit from them then why do they often look so silly and unbelieving?)

"The disciples were indignant" like the Older Brother in the Parable of the Wasteful Sons (Luke 15)... the brother who questioned WHY, when HE had always worked so hard "slaving" for the Father and then the other son comes home "broke and disheveled and has wasted OUR money and Dad's gonna throw HIM a PARTY?! Uh-uh – NOT on MY watch! WHAT A WASTE!"

And IF this act (by Mary) was the catalyst...was the spark that ignited all the combustible fuel that had gathered at this point...THEN far from snuff out (Isa 42.1-3) the smoldering... Jesus Christ pours oil on the fire! He defends her in such a LAVISH, over-the-top way that it matches her extravagant gesture! It's the longest speech in the passage:

"Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you; but you don't always have Me. For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her." (10-13)

Jesus Christ anticipates a time when (quote) "this gospel" will be proclaimed in the WHOLE

WORLD and that “her deed” will always be cited. Why so excessive? Why not just say, “Hey! Leave her alone, she meant well”? Why’s He so defensive of her?

Well...it appears that somehow...Mary was actually listening. Remember when Martha and Mary are sadly contrasted in Luke CH 10...and Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet and Martha criticizes her for acting like a ... like a MAN! Women aren’t disciples!

But Mary was actually listening...and when Jesus kept saying that He was going to die and the disciples kept insisting it was some sort of metaphor...Mary was thinking, “No...I think He means to die...He just said it again, ‘I will face crucifixion’ – I think He’s saying what He means!” (“Ah! What do women know!”)

And Jesus is saying, “She may not know all the details...but she’s light-years in front of you guys... her good deed perfectly illustrates: a. the motive for My coming... b. what I will do and c. on what SCALE I’LL DO IT!”

My motive in coming...just like her was love. That was her motive and that was MINE. And love doesn’t always seem to be practical or rational. It’s not a mathematical formula or calculation...it’s a heart on fire! And that’s why she came – she has a sense of wild, inexplicable relief – she knows what it means to be loved...and it ignited her heart! AND THAT IS THE REASON I CAME – out of love for My Father and out of love for YOU!”

And she offered a sacrifice today...it cost her entire savings and THAT is what I came to do. I came to make a sacrifice. She brought a “message in a bottle”...her act IS MY STORY. I’ve come to be broken so that the fragrance of grace can fill the whole world! The bottle has to be broken to get to the perfume...and I WILL HAVE TO DIE SO THAT GRACE AND FORGIVENESS AND NEW LIFE can fill the world... I didn’t come just to teach you a new plan for getting blessed/saved...I CAME TO BE BROKEN! I’m the Bottle...come to be sacrificed for YOU!”

“I came to live the life you all fail to live (to obey IN your place) and I came to die the death you all deserve to die... I CAME TO DIE...the Bottle that is broken is My Body... broken for YOU.”

John’s version said, “the house was filled with the fragrance” and Mary’s act is a symbol, a microcosm of what Jesus Christ really came to do: the perfume can’t help us until it’s poured out! Grace and forgiveness can’t fill the world unless He is broken.

Last, her manner, her excessive generosity mirrors the scale of Mine... She was extravagant and I will be too – I’ve been throwing seed all over the place (not just on the good soil – remember?)... I didn’t come to dab grace on the world (Ezk.47.5) ...and I will not SORT OF RATION MYSELF: I’ve come to give it all! I will say ‘It IS finished!’ and you will say, “With the LORD is abundant salvation!” (Ps 130.7)

The word “prodigal” (I’m sure you know) doesn’t mean “immoral” or “evil” – when we call it The Parable of the Prodigal Son...it refers to the fact that the son squandered or wasted his inheritance... And the real irony of that story was that the really extravagant one was the Father...He wanted to party with His children...He wanted to lavish His affection on them!

And Jesus Christ’s commending Mary is to say, “HER act mirrors MINE... I am the Prodigal Savior...not stingy/frugal... I am recklessly generous... I learned it from My Father,” says Jesus... “He gave Me a gift one time...I think YOU call it the Universe”...It was a gift from the Father to the Son – God is like that...way more generous that you could ever imagine!”

Mary gets it...she knows what it means to be forgiven and to be cherished and it made her crazy-generous and NOT calculating and careful not to do too much and closed-fisted (like the disciples who really hadn’t GOTTEN it ...yet!) She’s the Prodigal daughter!

And when WE get it...when we get gripped by the sense that God actually loves us... when we “feel” (can I say that in our Presbyterian context?) when I feel that God actually loves me and even likes me... that He knows all the worst things about me... He knows the secrets that I don’t want YOU to know and HE STILL LOVES ME...deeply...extravagantly.

And that He has profusely forgiven me and gave His Beloved Son...not begrudging...or half-hearted...or annoyed... but OUT OF UNIVERSE-SIZED love...He gave the fullness of His love IN Jesus Christ.

And when that grips me...when I am believing that...it allows me to be self-forgetful and creative in loving other people lavishly and INSIGHTFULLY (beyond a check-list) and not afraid of what others may think.

Are you sure that God loves YOU? Really, are you feeling it...are you seeing it in the doing and dying and rising of Jesus Christ for YOU? Have you received that gift and do you see that RIGHT NOW it’s your greatest need – to know the love of God in Jesus Christ... a love which surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph 3.19) ?

To know this love...sets us free to truly love.

The Communion

4.2.17

Mary’s love was THOUGHT to be impractical (Martha/men) and fanatical but actually it was entirely practical.

All that perfume would NOT have been just washed off (most of us have no idea what it would be like to live in a place with NO soap or fragrance) and that fragrance was almost certainly (not washed off) but still on Jesus Christ when He went into the Garden of Gethsemane and faced the great “fork in the Road”.

When Jesus Christ, the Last Adam, was in that Garden contemplating being cut off from the Father whom He’d known for all eternity... is it possible as He prayed, “If possible take this Cup from Me” ...and IN that moment ...is it possible He smelled the perfume still wafting off of Him...and that it came to Him in a powerful sensory experience... “If the bottle is not broken, the fragrance cannot fill the house...and if MY BODY is not broken...the fragrance of grace and forgiveness can not fill the earth.”

Maybe...just MAYBE... Mary...the listener...the receiver ...maybe her hearing the words of Jesus Christ... leading to relief and to LOVE...and that ridiculous display...maybe that act was a help to the Son of God that led Him to say, “Not My will, Father, but THY will be done.”

And maybe as WE hear the Gospel and NOW as we eat it and receive Jesus Christ as our spiritual food...maybe ...just maybe this active-passivity (the posture of faith) can help us love in creative...extravagant...self-forgetful ways that actually help the people around us.

Receiving grace is the way to get rid of our self-focus and our desire for recognition and affirmation from people... so that we can serve others out of FULLNESS and NOT out of a need for applause. Let’s look to God to fill us now.