

**HOLY WEDNESDAY:
A LEPER, A GRATEFUL WOMAN AND A TRAITOROUS FRIEND**

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 26:6-16

If you have not worshiped with us recently, you should know that we are in the midst of a Lenten sermon series, exploring, day by day, the last week of Jesus' life. Each Sunday during Lent we are focusing on a different day of that final week. Many in the congregation are also reading a Lenten book-in-common, *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, which complements the sermon series.¹ We have been noticing how much of the drama of Holy Week stems from a tension between two different kingdoms: on the one hand, the kingdom of this world—which in Jesus' time was the power structure of the Roman empire and the religious establishment in Israel that collaborated with it—and on the other, the kingdom of God proclaimed and inaugurated by Jesus.

We saw how the crowds welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday because they thought he was the worldly kind of king who, with God's muscle behind him, would overpower the occupying Romans and drive them out of Israel. As it turned out, of course, Jesus was not that kind of King, and in their disappointment, the cheering crowds of Sunday will be calling for his crucifixion by Friday. So, we keep asking ourselves during this Lenten series, what kind of King is Jesus? Over what sort of kingdom does he reign? What does he expect of his subjects, of those of us who have chosen to be his disciples?

We have arrived now at the Wednesday of Holy Week, the day before Jesus will be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Continuing his practice on Monday and Tuesday, Jesus spends Wednesday teaching in the temple. The crowds from throughout Israel who are in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival are spellbound by Jesus, but he has outraged the scribes and Pharisees and other religious leaders by repeatedly calling attention to their hypocrisy and to the stark difference between the kingdom God intends and the Roman system of domination and exploitation that the religious authorities have been supporting. Matthew's gospel shows us how on Holy Wednesday these enemies of Jesus begin to take action against him. "Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the Palace of the High Priest, . . . Caiaphas," Matthew writes, "And they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way, and kill Him. 'But not during the feast,' they said, 'or there may be a riot among the people.'"² So their plan was somehow to arrest Jesus, once the feast of the Passover was over.

So Holy Wednesday begins with Jesus teaching and the priests and elders scheming. What I'd like to focus on occurs that evening, however, when Jesus returns to

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

² Matthew 26:3-5.

Bethany, where he is staying. Bethany, you remember, is about two miles east of the temple, on the far side of the Mount of Olives. This particular evening Jesus along with his disciples comes to Bethany specifically to eat supper with a man known as Simon the leper. It's at that dinner that a follower of Jesus extravagantly anoints him with costly perfume (as one might anoint a king's body for burial). And it's from that dinner that Judas Iscariot slips away to betray Jesus. So let's consider briefly the events of that Wednesday evening in Bethany and what they have to tell us about Jesus.

We don't know anything about Simon the leper apart from this dinner on Holy Wednesday. Presumably he suffered from one of the many skin disorders that were called leprosy in biblical times. The people of that time thought leprosy was contagious. Scholars today debate whether that in fact was true, but they agree that Simon and other biblical lepers suffered as much from a social disease as from a physical one. Ritual laws of impurity drove people like Simon to the margins of society.³ They were ostracized and isolated. They were not allowed to move freely in public spaces. In fact, they had to chant as they walked down the street, 'Unclean, unclean,' so people knew that there was a leper coming.

"On Holy Wednesday, Jesus came and his disciples to eat supper at the home of a leper. Now this was not unusual for Jesus. He touched lepers. Nobody touched lepers, but Jesus touched the lepers. Jesus healed ten lepers. He set them free from their sicknesses. He had compassion for [those with whom] others wouldn't associate. [That's one of the main things we remember about Jesus and it certainly helps to frame our question about what kind of King Jesus is and what kind of Kingdom he ushers in.]"⁴

Now something took place at this dinner that was remembered and recorded in each of the four gospels.⁵ A woman approached Jesus while he was eating dinner with Simon and poured a pound of precious nard—perfumed oils worth a year's wages—on Jesus' head. In Matthew and Mark, this woman is unnamed. In Luke, she is said to be a 'sinner.' John alone identifies her as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha.

Borg and Crossan in our book-in-common focus on Mark's version of this story, and make the case that this unnamed woman, "alone of all those who heard Jesus' prophecies of his death and resurrection, believed him and drew the obvious conclusion. *Since (not if) you are going to die and rise, I must anoint you now beforehand, because I will never have the chance to do it afterward.* She is, for Mark, the first believer. She is, for us, the first Christian. And she believed from the word of Jesus before any discovery of an empty tomb."⁶

I think Borg and Crossan make a good case for that interpretation of Mark, but I personally am more drawn to the way John's gospel tells the story, where the woman anointing him is not an unnamed follower, but one of his dearest friends, Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. You remember Lazarus: Jesus raised him from the dead. In fact,

³ John L. Pilch, "Leprosy," *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 3* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 635-637.

⁴ Adam Hamilton, "Holy Wednesday: A Leper, A Grateful Woman And A Traitorous Friend," Sermon preached at United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, Leawood, Kansas, March 22, 2009.

⁵ Cf. Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8; and Luke 7:36-50.

⁶ Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, 104.

John tells the story of this great sign of Jesus' power in Chapter 11 of his gospel, just before he transitions into the events of Holy Week in Chapter 12.⁷ We need to keep Lazarus very much in mind to understand what Mary did that Holy Wednesday with the perfume at Simon's dinner.

So let's recall what happened. Lazarus had taken ill, and his sisters, Martha and Mary, had sent word to Jesus asking him to come heal him. Jesus received the news, but did not begin the journey to Bethany for several days. On the way, he learns that Lazarus has died, and then as he's entering Bethany, Martha meets him on the road and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Then Mary comes to Jesus, weeping with inconsolable grief. And Jesus, the Bible says, is "greatly disturbed in spirit and greatly moved" by this sight, and he begins to weep himself. It's one of only two times Jesus is said to weep. He weeps when He's looking over the city of Jerusalem as He's coming into the Holy City on Palm Sunday. He weeps when he sees Mary grieving the loss of her brother.

So they go to Lazarus's tomb, and Jesus asks them to remove the stone. They say, "Jesus, we can't do that. He's already been dead for several days." But he says, "Take away the stone." So they remove the stone, and then Jesus prays and says, "Lazarus, come forth." "The dead man came out, [the Bible says,] his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'"⁸

Imagine the wonder, relief and intense gratitude Martha and Mary must have felt when their brother came forth from the tomb after he had been dead for four days. No wonder Mary acts the way she does at Simon's dinner honoring Jesus! "She had received her brother back from the dead. She was expressing with extravagant generosity her praise and her thanksgiving to God and to Jesus who had delivered her brother to her. [She poured out her most precious possession freely upon Jesus. As it turned out, she was anointing his body for death. Whether or not she expected him to die, hers was an act of extravagant worship—and an example to us.]

"How do we express extravagant generosity to God? [I'm not thinking so much about our financial] offerings, although of course [gifts of money] are one way we [can and should worship God. But following Mary's example] goes well beyond that. It's offering every part of our lives, [all that is] most precious to us to God [in gratitude for what he's done for us, giving us life back. Mary didn't hold on to that precious perfume.] She was willing to give everything to the one who had given life back to her brother.

"[What] a tremendous contrast between Mary and Judas—Judas who [that night] sold Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver. Judas who was already on the take, [John tells us, skimming] money from the common purse of [all] the disciples. [All Judas could see as he sat there at Simon's dinner watching Mary was that the money used to buy this gift could have gone to the poor. Or so he said. We suspect he was less concerned for the poor than for having that money in the common purse where could get his hands on it. So we have one disciple, Judas, who's greedy for more and] willing to do whatever it takes to have it, and we have [another, Mary,] who's willing to give up her all [for her

⁷ John 11:45-53.

⁸ John 11:1-44.

Lord]... Which of the two do you suppose was more joy-filled in the presence of Jesus? Who found more satisfaction in life?

“[We do know (because Matthew tells us⁹) that Judas hanged himself on Good Friday when he realized what he had done in betraying Jesus. When he saw Jesus condemned to die, he repented and tried to give back the 30 pieces of silver. The authorities who had bribed him basically laughed at him. “You made your bed, now lie in it,” was basically what they told him. And it was too late anyway. Jesus was already dragging his cross up to Calvary because of his treachery. I imagine that Judas must have been a tormented soul.] He had followed Jesus; he was [one of the twelve original] disciples. He’d done all the things that the disciples had done, and yet somehow there were mixed motives for Judas. He struggled with his desire for wealth. In fact, that’s what led him, in part, to go to the high priest’s house. He said, ‘How much will you pay me [if I] betray Jesus?’ [He may also have been struggling with] his frustration with Jesus, [whom he expected] to raise up [a] sword and an army to overthrow the Romans. [He never understood the true nature of Jesus’ kingdom.]

“[Yet Judas repented. He said, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ Sadly, he despaired at what he had done, and hanged himself. I have] to wonder, with such remorse in his heart, what would have happened if [Judas] had just waited three days? If he had [been there among the other disciples when they encountered the risen Christ on Easter Day? What would have happened if Judas had] fallen at Jesus’ feet and said, ‘Lord, please have mercy on me.’ What do you think Jesus would have said? What would he have done? Would Jesus have shown mercy to Judas? [Forgiven] even Judas Iscariot? And you know the answer. Of course he would have!

“If Judas had just waited three days. [For the third day was Easter Day.] There is no sin so great that [the risen Christ] can’t and won’t forgive. [His mercy is from everlasting to everlasting! And imagine what powerful] testimony Judas would have had from that [day] forward: having seen the risen Christ, [having experienced such repentance and forgiveness, having finally understand what it means to be a subject of God’s kingdom. Judas’s faith journey took a different path from those of Simon the leper and Lazarus and Mary and others who were at dinner with the Lord that Holy Wednesday in Bethany. Yet what a preacher Judas might have been—traveling like the Apostle Paul] across the Roman Empire, and being able to tell the story of how he had turned his back on Jesus, how he had betrayed the Lord and sold Him out for 30 pieces of silver. And yet Jesus had forgiven him, even him.

“[Judas was not the only one who betrayed Jesus. In the end, all of disciples betrayed him, denied him, abandoned him to be crucified alone as they ran for their lives. And who among us has not betrayed our King at times, by things we have done and things we have left undone; by giving other parts of our lives the first place that belongs only to him; by giving into fleeting passions and pleasures that separate us from him?]

“[Today I am inviting you to remember how great is God’s great mercy in Jesus Christ.] If Jesus would have forgiven Judas[—as surely he would have—will he not also forgive you and me?]

⁹ Matthew 27:3-5.

“[Let us pray.]

“God, we give you thanks and praise for your extravagant mercy, for your forgiveness and grace. We confess...that we have denied you, and betrayed you, and turned our back on you [more times than we can remember. It goes against our grain, our sense of prudence and self-preservation to show extravagant generosity] towards you and towards others. Forgive us for our mixed motives...Wash us clean and make us new. Draw us near to you and help us faithfully to serve you from this time forward and forevermore. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Hamilton, “Holy Wednesday.”