Sermon: Value in Oil

Scripture: Matthew 26:6-13; John 12:1–8

Fifth Sunday in lent

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Our first Scripture reading comes from gospel of Matthew chapter 26, verses 6-13. One can argue that this chapter sets the background for the Passion of Christ. Earlier portion of this chapter lets us know that this is taking place two days prior to Passover, as Jesus prepares for the Purpose of his journey – triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Hear now the word of the Lord.

**6**Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, **7**a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. **8**But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? **9**For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” **10**But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. **11**For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. **12**By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. **13**Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Our second scripture reading comes from Gospel of John, Chapter 12:1-8. This passage is very similar to Matthew’s passage in that they both take place in Bethany, but only it’s six days prior to Passover. It also shares a literary structure: a woman anoints Jesus, her action is defended by Jesus and gives an explanation which foreshadows Jesus’ death and that her act is seen as a preparation for his own burial, and finally with a reminder that poor will be always with us. Because of its similarities, some argue that these are a same story, told in a different way. Regardless, most important message from these passages is the Jesus’ common response to the question and actions that are taking place. Hear now the word of the Lord.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **2**There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. **3**Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. **4**But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, **5**“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” **6**(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) **7**Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. **8**You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, on this Sunday morning, as we cherish your new mercies, may we also experience your love that is given to us through your Holy Word. As you have been anointed, may we, too, be anointed by One and Holy Spirit that connects us ever so closer to you. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

On this 5th Sunday of Lent, we continue to look for ordinary items that communicates the message of Christ through this holy season. Today we will look at oil and how it reminds us of Christ’s sacrifice for us.

Oil is something that we cannot live without. Various types of oil and its derivatives allow us to live our lives the way to do. Yet, us being an Earth Care congregation, I will simply say we need to depend less on those type of oil products. Oil in ancient days is one commodity that people could not live without. It was used as a fuel to keep the light burning, used as medicine to heal the wounds, to use for food, to be used as a moisturizer for one’s skin, and even used as a currency a form of currency. If you were traveling anywhere, this was one item that was surely to be packed in abundance for it had multiple uses and great value.

Not much has changed from the ancient days in how we use oils as well as how it is produced. In many parts of the world, good quality oils are being pressed under tremendous amount of pressure to squeeze the oil out from the fruit or seed. Hence oil itself represents something very interesting and unique when it is used in Christian practices, such as baptism, ordination, Ash Wednesday, or different type of anointing: it symbolizes when one is under extreme pressure from its physical self – or in familiar Biblical language “when we are set apart, something Holy.” Although most of times it is an item we use so that the food we are cooking does not get stuck to the frying pan, however, when it is used for special purpose with full understanding, it can become a life-changing agent and catalyst.

In today’s texts, both the unnamed woman and Mary anoints Jesus with oil and perfume. These women were led to make a public declaration; that in their eyes, Jesus was sacred, that he is holy, and that he was someone who was set apart from this world. They not only believed in Jesus was the Messiah promised, but they also needed to put their beliefs into action: a faith that couldn’t stay silent any longer. They, too, wanted and needed to be set apart in order to live out their calling as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that [they] may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.[[1]](#footnote-2) Today’s Scriptures is asking us a direct question for all of us: do you have a space and room in your heart for Jesus?

It is ironic that Jesus came into the world where there was not a room for him to be born and was led into a stable. Yet, as Jesus was preparing for his departure from his humanity, he was looking for a room in people’s hearts to see if he can reign there. How often did Jesus foretold of what was to come? How many parables of the banquets and of stories groomsman who was coming for his beloved bride was told to tell us to make a room for him in our hearts and to prepare for the wonderous love that is coming?

In his book, The Power of Story, Jim Loehr shares this story:   
Loehr would often make an offer in his workshops – typically made of 15-30 individuals in the room, mostly Type A’s. His institute will award a certified check for $5 million and pay the taxes on it, if anyone who would walk across a plank that spans two towers in downtown Orlando, each 175 feet high and separated by gap of 36 feet. He would openly share that he thought the chance of success is 80%

When this offer is given, maybe one hand goes up, rarely more than three, often none.

Loehr then continues: “Did I give the plank’s dimensions? Twelve inches wide, one and a quarter inch think, a little give.” And usually the same two or three hands remain in the air. So he raises up the ante and raises the award to $50 million, and one or two additional people raises their hands.

Then he changes the motivation. “Ok, how about this: You’re standing on the roof of Tower A. Thirty-six feet away, on the roof of Tower B, stands your family. To save their lives, you must cross the plank. Who’s up for it?” Loehr reports that every single hand goes up; Every single time.

When the disciples saw the expensive oil and perfume being poured out, they were mistaken in terms of what they were looking at. They did not see the value in oil that these women were offering up to Jesus. It was not about money. It was not about amount of sacrifice they had to make to collect three hundred denarii – which is equivalent to a year’s wage for most first-century Palestinians, it was not about titles or status, but it was doing whatever it takes to grow their love for Jesus. In the end, it is same for us. It is doing whatever it takes to grow our love for God and our love for others.

So what is your alabaster jar that you are holding on to, what is the value in your oil that you are called to pour out? What service is God calling you to do and to whom? And most importantly, is your first pour to God and rest in God’s name? Is your life full of worshipping God in your words and deeds? As we prepare our hearts for the final stretch of Lenten Season and upcoming Holy Week and Easter, let our hearts be full with praise and devotion to God, making space for God to reign in us, and wait for the Lord; because when we place hope and trust in God, God will lead us, equip us, and use us to proclaim the good news in the world, and God will remember us for each deed that we have done in Christ’s name. Amen.

1. 2 Peter 2:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)