

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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7/7/24

Sermon Title: Ready for a Funeral

Sermon Text: Matthew 26:1-16

Matt. 26:1 ¶ When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples,

Matt. 26:2 “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.”

Matt. 26:3 ¶ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas,

Matt. 26:4 and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.

Matt. 26:5 But they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.”

Matt. 26:6 ¶ Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,

Matt. 26:7 a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table.

Matt. 26:8 And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste?”

Matt. 26:9 For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.”

Matt. 26:10 But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me.

Matt. 26:11 For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.

Matt. 26:12 In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.

Matt. 26:13 Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.”

Matt. 26:14 ¶ Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests

Matt. 26:15 and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.

Matt. 26:16 And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Main Point: True worship is not defined by tastes, by preferences, or by aesthetics, but by God’s revealed will.

Outline:

1. A Belittled Worship
2. A Beautiful Thing
3. A Burial

Introduction

There’s a lot going on in this passage. But what is the most *important* thing that happens? What is the thing that really deserves our focus and attention?

It’s tempting to focus on the people who are plotting Jesus’ death. After all, what more evil thing could a person do than plan to kill the very creator himself?

It’s also tempting to focus on Judas the betrayer, after all, we see in Judas this proactive desire to betray him. We see that he is overcome with greed and even leads with his plan by talking money: “What will you give me if I deliver him over?” He’s greedy and worldly. Fleshly. He’s willing to hand him over, but he wants money for it. “How much?” Tempting to put our attention there. Maybe later.

You see all of these motivations and negative plans taking place. It’s so tempting to say, “We need to study this more. We need to understand the inner workings of the wicked mind. Perhaps if we do, we can know human nature better. And

perhaps we can learn something about avoiding sin ourselves.” I’m sure there’s some truth to this. There’s probably a sermon in there if we dug far enough.

But here is what I’d like to do. I’d like to acknowledge the villains of the passage, as I’ve already done. But then I want to move on. And it’s not because we don’t need to know why Jesus was betrayed, or who did the betraying. It’s because staring into the face of sin and evil is not half as edifying as looking at what is good and true and beautiful.

Paul in Philippians tells us,

“whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8).

To be honest I think we’ll find more health if we do that instead of dwelling on Judas or Jesus’ other adversaries here.

You see, here is what is so amazing: in the middle of such evil plotting and planning, at the *same* moment these enemies of Jesus are preparing him for his death, a woman comes to prepare him for his burial.

But the motives for everyone are very different. Whereas *they* prepare him for his death from selfishness, from hatred, from evil hearts... this woman today comes to prepare him for his death with tenderness, with love, with dedication, and with worship. Which of these things do you think will be more edifying to our souls? To spend 30 minutes with these guys, or 30 minutes with *her*?

We’re well acquainted with evil. We carry it around in our hearts all the time. But there is so much good to be found by looking at true and beautiful worship. And that’s what this woman shows us. So everyone in this passage is dedicated to preparing for Jesus’ death, but some prepare for worship. Some prepare for rejection. His enemies prepare with malice; the ones who love him do it with tenderness.

Before we begin to focus on this woman’s act of worship, a few preliminaries. What’s going on here?:

There has been a change of location since Jesus gave his Olivet Discourse and predictions of his second coming.

Today's anointing of Jesus takes place in the town of Bethany, which is two miles from Jerusalem. We know from Luke's gospel that Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus *also* live in Bethany. In fact, the modern day location of Bethany is named after Lazarus.

The anointing of Jesus takes place in the home of "Simon the leper." We can deduce a few things about this man. This was a man who had the dreaded skin disease leprosy. He still carried the stigma of leprosy in his name. It appears that he is sort of eternally marked with this name (the poor guy): his is no longer a leper, but he is still called "Simon the Leper." He was evidently a *former* leper, because now he can dine with others and have others in his home.

You know, it isn't difficult to surmise also that the reason Jesus is in this man's home is because this man is among those whose leprosy has been healed by Jesus during the course of his ministry. Jesus is now the guest of someone who has been delivered from his suffering by the mercy of Jesus. Now he has opened his home and is sharing his table with the Lord who saved him.

Into this situation comes a woman.

Matthew only calls her "a woman." But we know from John 12:3 (which records this same event) that this woman is actually Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. For Matthew, the focus is not on Mary herself (that's why she doesn't get named). Matthew's focus is on the *act* of worship that she performs in this place.

What happens here? Three things I'd like us to focus on: first, a belittled worship. Second, a beautiful thing. And then third, a burial. How does Mary approach and worship Jesus, and what can we learn about our own worship from Mary's worship?

1. A Belittled Worship

First, we see a belittled worship.

We will look at the specifics of how she shows worship to him in the next point, but I want you to notice that Mary enters the home with this alabaster flask, she breaks the flask and pours it over his head. Notice the response: she makes the whole room incredibly uncomfortable. The skeptics appear almost immediately: “I wouldn’t do it this way. There are far more efficient ways to use the resources God has given to us.”

Oh, they are so wise. They’re so sensible. Of course! It makes all the sense in the world. The argument is airtight, isn’t it? In a sense, really, when should this nard *ever* be used? Once you open it, it’s worthless. Better to sell it than to ever actually use it, right?

They look down on her worship. It’s stupid. It’s a bad idea. Even though they like being around Jesus, and they like listening to his teachings, and they almost certainly appreciate what he does and says, the disciples are really not looking at Jesus with hearts of worship. They are all business.

They may believe in worship, but their idea of worship isn’t Christ-centered, it’s man-centered. They wouldn’t say it this way, but their plan is to dedicate this perfume to the poor. Their plan is to honor the poor, not Jesus. Given the choice between spending a year’s worth of resources on Jesus, or on the poor they are saying they’d rather give those resources to the poor.

It isn’t that helping the poor is wrong – far from it – but they choose the poor over Christ. There’s also a streak of pragmatism here, isn’t there? “We could see something for our effort if we gave this away.” They want worship that is practical, that’s sensible, that makes sense to *them*. And they want *her* to worship in a way that makes sense to them. This kind of worship doesn’t make sense to them. This is some kind of otherworldly worship that doesn’t do anything for anyone, or appeal to their own felt needs or desires.

In our own day, we are surrounded by worship mindsets that appeal to various desires. For some, they desire elaborate images and decorations... ceremonies... things that we are told are meant to turn our eyes to the worldly realms and sensory things. Some people do yearn for such things and the feeling they create, even if the church in Scripture seems to worship very well without any mention of them. Around the 400s or so, we started to really see this change take place in the

worship of the church, as more and more accoutrements were added to what God had already given his people.

Others, especially in our own day, yearn for something else... glossy, entertaining, loud, distracting, individualistic worship that is often observed like a concert rather than participated in by the church. Here you can barely hear the voices of God's people as they sing. The focus is on "me" and my response to God, instead of on God, and what he has done and why he is worthy.

These divergent impulses toward the external and the individual, in one sense represent very divergent instincts. But actually *both* of these postures are ultimately centered around the individual and their desires. Instead of asking, "What has God said?" such worship is oriented around another very different question: "What makes sense to me? How will this make me feel?" All in the service of God, of course, but done *my way*.

The worship of this woman does not appeal to the felt needs of the disciples, nor does it make sense to them. And for some of us, the worship of Christ's church may or may not appeal to our felt needs.

Our worship here at Evergreen is very simple. We open and read the Scriptures. We pray. We sing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We hear the word of God preached. We observe the Lord's Supper and baptism. All of these things we find in Scripture, commanded by God as the practice of the church.

It's easy to see how others worship and to want what they have. To think, "Maybe something is missing over here." It's tempting to covet the worship that others engage in.

But let's try this: instead of asking what we consider beautiful worship to be, let's let God tell us. What kind of worship really *is* beautiful, according to the Bible? What we will find in just a moment is not a focus on external appearances, but on the condition of the heart.

2. A Beautiful Thing

Our second point today is “A Beautiful Thing.”

So follow what happens here: the disciples complain about this woman’s worship. It’s not what we want. It’s not what we expect. It doesn’t appeal to us. It isn’t practical enough. This is far too spontaneous, actually. That’s their sense of things. But what does *Jesus* say? First, in verse 10 Jesus replies to them, “Why do you trouble the woman?”

They are interrupting her worship with complaints about her worship.

And Jesus rebukes them not only for their timing, but also for the core of their complaint. If I could state the contrast plainly: they think this is a bad and ugly thing that she is doing. It’s an ugly thing to waste this much perfume.

But Jesus just totally disagrees with them. Their values, their idea of beauty is wrong. And I think it’s right for all of us to distrust our own tastes just a bit more than we probably do. What people often find worshipful and what *God* finds worshipful can be two very different things. Jesus says, on the contrary, “She has done a *beautiful* thing to me” (v. 10). The Greek word here is *kalos*, which in this contrast is not just “good.” It’s not just “acceptable,” but the word “beautiful” really is the best translation.

But what made this thing that this woman did “good” or “beautiful”? There are a few things that we can see from the text.

First, it’s beautiful because of the value of the one being honored. It is Jesus himself, who is the object of her worship. Her thoughts as she did this were on Jesus, while the disciples’ minds were on others. The core fundamental question we should really be asking is, “Who is being worshiped?” Is it the worshiper, or is it God? Who is the worship fixated on?

Two thoughts on this point. One is, have you ever gone somewhere else with very different worship and been tempted to judge? It’s easy to look down on faithful brothers and sisters because they have drums, or because they don’t have piano. Because someone strums a guitar, or because the music sounds dated. We might judge in all sorts of directions depending on our tastes and where we are.

But the most important question we have to ask is, “Who is being worshiped here?” And if it is Jesus, I would suggest that we go easy, and perhaps even reprimanding ourselves if we are being petty.

Second I would say this regarding focusing on Jesus: In our own worship, when we come corporately together, we are grateful for those whose gifts have made the worship possible. But our attention should not be on the one leading worship, on the musicians, or on the person standing next to us. We should be grateful to the Lord for them, but they are not who this is about.

Even the sermon is not about the preacher. I consider it a failed sermon when people are more interested in a funny story or illustration rather than the idea of the text. There is a such thing as too good of an illustration. Those stories are meant to make you focus more on the point of the text, not on me.

It is the one being honored who makes worship beautiful. He is beautiful, and so worship that points to him will also be beautiful.

Second, this worship is beautiful because of the value of the gift. In this case, she sacrificed an alabaster jar of spikenard. According to the best sources we have, this would have been imported from Egypt. The ointment is pure nard, which would have come from the Himalayan region of northern India. These were some of the most costly materials that the earth could produce at this time. It would have cost a year’s wages to have this. We don’t know if Mary’s family was wealthy, or if this was an inheritance of some sort, but it was incredibly valuable. She gave up something costly in order to be a worshiper. And that made her worship beautiful, because it cost her something. It was not an easy thing.

The cost of worship contributes to its beauty. There are people around the world who worship Jesus in cramped spaces, in difficult places, with no windows or pitched ceilings, in underground places, perhaps or cramped apartments. There are a number of Chinese pastors right now worshiping Jesus privately from their jail cells. Their worship is costly because of what they will lose if they are found out. Aesthetically, they are in ugly places. And yet their worship is beautiful. Their worship may actually be *more* beautiful in the eyes of God than worship that takes place in the most fabulous

cathedral you can imagine. It is the costliness of the worship that magnifies the beauty of the worship.

A third feature that makes this worship beautiful is the limited time *available to honor him*. Jesus' words indicate that the brief time he had is part of what made the worship of him a higher priority than other good deeds that were certainly valid. There are some things that cannot wait. Even the poor can wait, says Jesus. But the window of worship in this case is quite narrow. In the short time that she has, she chooses to honor Jesus.

I would challenge all of us: the time we have to worship Christ is also limited. Each day only has 24 hours in it. Your time is the most valuable resource that you have. It is limited. You cannot increase it, and it is set by God. How will you use the limited span of your life? Are you using your life well? Will you dedicate your life to Jesus, or will you make your life about yourself mainly? We have to self-examine when it comes to this.

Fourth, this worship is beautiful because of the gratitude of the one doing the honoring. We can see her gratitude in the way she sacrifices of her time and her talent and her treasure to give Jesus all that she has. And the truth is, it is a precious thing to worship God in the midst of true gratitude.

I remember my very first Sunday worshiping as a teenager after I truly repented and trusted in Jesus. Again, some of you may have grown up in the church and may never remember a time when you didn't believe. But I was an unbeliever and an atheist, and when I for the first time repented of my sins, believed in Jesus, and trusted in him and not myself, I remember being dumbfounded that I was able to even worship at all. I had a sense of gratitude that I had never known before. And if you have been forgiven, you can perhaps relate to this.

Do you remember the woman in Luke 7, who came and washed Jesus' feet with her tears and her hair? After she did this, Jesus drew attention to her gratitude and he said, "He who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47).

What makes this woman's worship beautiful is the object of her worship, the cost of her worship, the time given to her worship, and the gratitude that fuels her worship.

But you will notice that all of this isn't usually how we think of beauty, is it? There's nothing traditionally or aesthetically beautiful here, right? Jesus is speaking of beauty here in a way we do not normally speak. What people often find beautiful and what God finds beautiful can sometimes be two very different things. We tend to see beauty superficially. Right? We naturally go by looks. By the feelings something creates. That's the way the world thinks about beauty: by appearance.

But Jesus says, "Do not judge by appearances but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24). Samuel says, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." The beauty Jesus savors here is not an aesthetic beauty based on looks or feelings; true beauty, for Jesus, is a moral beauty. But if everything you know about beauty comes from the pagan thinkers, then you will not understand what Jesus sees beautiful here.

Jesus is not saying that what this woman has done is a pleasing image or sight. In fact, she had to destroy the beautiful jar in order to worship in this way. If anything she's an iconoclast. She's breaking the big expensive thing and making it useless. On a superficial level, beauty has been *lost* here, hasn't it? But in another sense, nothing was more beautiful than when that aesthetic item was broken so that true worship could take place.

The beauty that Jesus sees is found not on the surface, but in the heart of the worshiper and in having rightly ordered loves. She loved the right thing, she loved the good thing – Jesus himself, and she sacrificed a valuable thing to honor him.

This shows us that physical aesthetics have some value (or else what she gave up would have been *without* value and therefore her sacrifice would have been paltry). But we also know that beautiful worship happens all over the world in all sorts of contexts and environments because beautiful worship comes from a heart that is set on Jesus, and *he* is the one that makes the worship beautiful.

If you remember Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4, the woman wanted to argue with Jesus about worship spaces: where should we do it? What's the right place to worship? She's hung up on geography, right? And Jesus responds that the time is coming and is now here when it doesn't matter where you are standing as you sing praises to God.

What will matter is this: are you worshiping in spirit and in truth? He doesn't say, the true worshipers will have stained glass, or plain walls, or elaborate walls, or certain ceilings or certain lights or certain candles or certain pulpit designs, or certain pews, or whatever. You can have all of them or none of them and still worship. Jesus says, the real difference between true (and I think we could even say beautiful) worship is this: is it in Spirit, and is it in truth?

If it's neither of these then nothing else matters. If it's not in spirit and in truth, then our worship is garbage and might as well not be happening at all. If we're obsessed with the superficial, but our heart is not in it, then God hates it. If we're obsessed with the looks or the sound, but it's not in spirit and in truth, then we're not worshiping, and there's nothing beautiful about it to God. And he is the only audience that matters.

We see the element of truth here in her worship as well, because what is she doing? She's preparing Jesus' body for something that is coming, whether the disciples like it or not.

3. A Burial

That brings us to our third point today: a burial. Because that's what this anointing is preparing for.

It might be tempting for the disciples to minimize what this woman has done. After all, women were certainly looked down on in the first century. But Jesus actually says the opposite in verse 13: "Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."

We don't have to wonder why this act of devotion is so important. Jesus interprets it for us. Jesus doesn't just say this is a beautiful thing. He also interprets it. He

says, “In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial” (v. 12). Jesus reads this in light of his coming death. His disciples don’t want to think about his death, but Mary does.

Mary prepares Jesus for his burial by showing honor to his body –by means of his human nature. He calls it “my body.” Think of even how amazing *that phrase* is: “My body.” That God could use the words “my body”! That the creator of the universe would have ever even *used* those two words together: that really is the wonder of the incarnation. It’s something we could barely conceive of: God has a body. Who could have imagined it? God has a body in the person of Jesus.

His body, and what is about to happen to it is the focus of her dedication here in a way that reminds us, the physical matters. Our bodies matter. Our bodies are not just husks to be shed one day, or denied as though they don’t matter. Instead, the physical does matter. Our bodies matter.

And this means also that the human nature of Jesus is just as important and worthy of our love and worship as his divine nature, because they are both united in this one person. When we think of Jesus, we can never think of the natures separately. The very thing that makes him Jesus is that both natures are always and forever held together – distinct but inseparable – in his person.

And we ought to glorify God that Jesus has a real human body. It is by virtue of the very fact that he is very and truly man that he could stand in our place and receive our punishment.

You, sinner, can know forgiveness because another human being took the punishment that sinful human beings deserved. What an incredible marvel! Mary is marveling here. She is worshiping here. The creator of the universe has a body. And she is preparing that body for his coming death.

Do you glorify God for the human nature of Jesus? Or do you go right to the divine nature only when you think of Jesus? Mary gives appropriate attention to Jesus’ body. His human nature is the very vehicle of our rescue.

How can any of us be washed and cleansed? Only by the shed blood of Christ. And that required a body. It is his death... made possible by his incarnation, by his human nature, which saves sinners like you and me.

Think of all the cleansing that is here in this passage: the woman is in a sense washing the body of Jesus in preparation for his burial. But this is also a home of a washed man, isn't it? John Chrysostom points out how perfect it is that this woman comes to the home of a man who was a former leper. Here's what Chrysostom says: seeing this leper cleansed gave her the ability to come to Jesus here. Why? Because "she saw that Jesus had both healed the man, and gone into his house; she grew confident, that He would also easily wipe off the uncleanness of *her* soul."

"If he can wash leprosy, he can wash me. If he can wash this man's skin clean, all the more he can wash my own heart."

Will you come to Jesus? Will you let him wash you? Will you let him cleanse you? And will you respond by worshiping him in spirit and in truth?

Let's pray together.