

*The Poured Out Life: Pour Out Power*  
*Palm Sunday*  
Mark 14:1-9

Palm Sunday is the day in the church year when our heads snap. They're supposed to. We are reminded this day that life can turn on a dime. If we immerse ourselves in the drama that will take us to Easter next Sunday, we start this day in the triumph of a noisy, joyful parade. Imagine hundreds, maybe thousands, of people lining the street, cheering for this 'leader of the people', a hero so charmingly humble that he enters riding on the animal that is a Toyota instead of a Tesla. There were no sharp breaks in the magic of that parade. The authorities do not shut it down. It just ends. The people go home, still smiling, to begin their preparations for the big holiday that is coming this week, Passover. But somehow, something ugly, insidious, has seeped into the joy of this day. A whispering campaign has begun. And tomorrow—just tomorrow!—the principal actor in this parade, the crowd's popular hero, will be marked for death.

Palm Sunday is the hinge in the Gospel story. It's the moment everything turns. We know now: Jesus' premonitions about his own death, that he's been talking to his disciples about all along, are not just existential dread. He was right. He will die. For a long time, no one else has been able to see it. No one wanted to see it.

The story we read this morning happens in this context. The Palm Sunday parade is over. Something has shifted. Does everyone see it? Is there a tension in the air that everyone can feel? Or do people go back to work and school as if the parade was just a weekend pastime? I'm not sure. I wonder.

As Mark tells the story, after the Sunday parade, Jesus keeps going with the work he came to do. He goes for dinner to the home of a man who has suffered with leprosy; his name is Simon. Does Simon have this skin disease now, or has he invited Jesus to dinner to thank him for healing him? I'm not sure of that either. What we are told is that while Jesus is there at dinner, probably surrounded by men only, a woman walks in, carrying a jar made of alabaster. Alabaster is a heavy and beautiful stone, like marble. Did they know she was coming? Had she been invited? Apparently not. She interrupts this dinner, walks right over to Jesus, *breaks* her alabaster jar, and pours its contents over Jesus' head.

It sounds like a bad joke, doesn't it? An obnoxious prank. But Jesus doesn't take it as that. The jar contained undiluted nard, one of the most expensive perfumes in the world. Nard was imported, distilled from a plant that grows only in India. Mark tells us that a jar of perfume like this one would have cost as much as a worker made in a year. Anyone who managed to get their hands on even a little bit of nard would save it, hoard it, to use when it was most needed: to mask the smell of death. In an age before embalming and in the heat of a desert, if someone you loved died, you would anoint the body—sparingly—with this intense perfume, to hold you through to its burial.

This woman's action that evening, in Simon's home, was disruptive, shocking in so many ways. The sudden presence of an uninvited guest. The sharp crack as the heavy jar broke. The intense smell as perfume permeated the room. The visual: a thick, oily liquid dripping off Jesus' hair and into his beard, drenching his shoulders, his lap.

As Mark wrote his gospel, he *wanted* this scene to make us sit up straighter, pay extra attention. Here's how I know that; I'm going to tell you another one of those little secrets you only learn in seminary. This story appears as part of what biblical scholars call a 'Markan sandwich'. Mark uses this technique several times in his gospel to clue his readers in about a scene that has particular significance. Whenever some minor character—a Gentile, a Roman soldier, or even an evil spirit—recognizes that Jesus is God-with-us (which happens often in Mark's story), that scene is sandwiched in between stories that say how slow the disciples are to see the same thing. The Transfiguration, when long-dead prophets, Moses and Elijah, appear on a mountaintop next to Jesus, confirming his identity as the voice of God, that happens in between two slices of Jesus talking about his own coming death. Whenever Mark wants to tell a story that reveals something uniquely true about this presence of God in human form, he makes a sandwich.

This story is the same. Just before it happens, we're told, the chief priests and legal experts were using "*cunning tricks*" to find a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. And then, just as this story ends, Judas, Jesus' own disciple, conspires with those tricksters. He sells Jesus out to them, offers to facilitate Jesus' arrest, for thirty pieces of silver.

In between these two pieces of treachery and brutality that are the staples of human life, there is this startling story of extravagant beauty and over-the-top devotion. A single woman who crashes through a whole field of dark threats to soak Jesus in expensive compassion.

Jesus isn't weirded-out; he's moved. He sees the adoration this woman intends, her unmeasured gratitude for something she has seen in him. The perfume she pours over him acknowledges that his death is coming...soon. Finally he feels seen, heard, understood in a way that no parade could ever make him feel. He is deeply appreciative. "*Wherever in the whole world the good news is announced, what she's done will also be told...*"

I think about this woman's unseemly gesture, the risk she took to break into someone else's house-- not to take something, but to pour something out. In any practical analysis what she did was entirely useless. She made a mess that someone would have to clean up; she broke a jar that could have been re-used; she wasted valuable perfume that could have anointed a hundred bodies. When Jesus admired her action instead of rebuking her for it, the pragmatic Judas had had enough. His frustration hit its breaking point. So much waste! So much value just spilled onto the floor.

I was going to ask you which character in this story you are most like. But I don't think that's the question here. I don't think there's a 'lesson' in this story that says you should always be wasteful and extravagant; that pragmatism has no value to Jesus, or to God. I think what matters is knowing what is called for in this moment. In any moment. Are there times when preserving energy and time and resources in order to use them more productively is the right thing to do? Absolutely. But are there times when our efficiency instincts get in the way and obscure what is more important right now, the less practical need that is squarely in front of us? Yes. Probably more often than we know.

This week this church hosted a memorial service for the Los Altos High School student who had died a week ago from what has been reported as a drug overdose. Friends of the family came into the office early in the week, to ask if we could do this. They weren't looking for much of what a church usually offers. No pastor, no regular memorial service. They just needed a space where

people could gather and be together in their grief, their shock, their not understanding what had just happened.

And so that's what your church gave them. I've been marveling all week—and maybe you will too—that the church's service to the community this week didn't require the work of a single person on the pastoral team. LAUMC's hospitality and generosity and faithful witness to the love of God for a family in grief was enacted *entirely* by our facilities staff and our audio-visual team. They didn't need my guidance or reminders about the church's mission. They knew already how to pay attention to what was needed. They scrambled their schedules and work around—extravagantly, generously. They listened, and heard, what needed to be done. And they did it.

Was hosting that service productive for the church? Will it bring new members, or donations, or comments about the church's great preachers? Most likely not. And this time, this time, none of that mattered.

There are so many big problems in the world today, problems worth saving ourselves for, problems worth deliberating about, analyzing what solutions we ought to contribute to. The next wave of a pandemic that just will not quit. Climate change, the still-unfinished work of racial reconciliation, the plague of gun violence. A war that is killing hundreds of people every day. We want to be efficient, careful, strategic. Every move, every effort, every dollar we donate, has to count, it seems. It makes sense to conserve our resources, give our time and money and energy slowly, very carefully, a few drops at a time; make sure we are not exhausted or poured out before the work is done. Measuring ourselves out carefully, holding back at the same time we are leaning in, seems like the rational, practical thing to do.

But what if this week, right now, something else is called for? What if there is in front of you right now a love, an act of pure compassion, worth pouring yourself out for?

I'm wondering if this Holy Week, this Easter, the Church is the alabaster jar that has been broken. In so many ways, the Church is now a fractured version of its former self. We could say that is a terrible thing, a tragedy. But maybe it's not. What if the Church has been broken *open*, so that what comes out of it is not dripping but pouring? Like a river. Like it cannot be held back or conserved. What if you—what if we—are the perfume that has been spilled out all over everything, making a mess out of order, for no practical purpose other than to remind the world of beauty and gratitude and awe. What if that is exactly what the world needs from us this week: a foolish, extravagant confidence that a bigger story is unfolding. That Easter is coming, even now.

