

Sermon #1,130: St. Mark 14:1-9 (#333, *Passion Hymn*, 303, 575)
3-4-15 (Lent 2 Midweek Vespers), Bethany-Princeton MN
Also preached 3-11-15 at Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Santiago Twp., MN

"I TELL YOU THE TRUTH:
GOOD WORKS DONE FOR JESUS WILL BE REMEMBERED"

The Text, St. Mark 14:3-9 (GWN). ³ While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the leper and was reclining at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfume, real nard and very expensive. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on His head. ⁴ But some who were felt annoyed and said to one another, "Why was the perfume wasted like this? ⁵ This perfume could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor." And they were grumbling at her. ⁶ Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to Me. ⁷ For the poor you always have with you, and you can help them whenever you want to, but you are not always going to have Me. ⁸ She has done what she could. She came ahead of time to pour perfume on My body to prepare it for burial. ⁹ I tell you the truth, wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. O Lord Jesus Christ, our merciful Savior, grant, we humbly ask You, that our souls may be profited by devout meditation on Your holy Passion. Fill our hearts with Your Holy Spirit, that, like Mary of Bethany, we may with a humble and contrite heart seek and find comfort in Your love, and present to You as an acceptable offering the willing service of our lives, renouncing the world, and bearing patiently our crosses. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy, companion altar book for The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 106)

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It says here that Jesus was in Bethany. He was "**in the home of Simon the leper,**" someone who previously had leprosy and was healed, we can be sure, by Jesus. Now he invited Jesus into His home to thank Him and honor Him publicly. Bethany is also where Jesus' dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. In fact, they are there. In John it says that Martha was – guess what? -- serving, and Lazarus was eating with Jesus, and – although Mark does not go into such detail -- John in his gospel tells us this woman with the perfume is actually Mary.

Lazarus' presence at the table is somewhat miraculous. Recently Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead – in John it is the chapter right before the one in which this scene takes place. They would be looking back on those four grief-stricken days that Lazarus had been dead and buried, and would be beside themselves with joy that he is with them again. Remember how the whole community had come to Mary and Martha to mourn with them and support them? These people are close to each other. We may take it that Jesus' healing of Simon was also recent. They gather in Simon's house to acknowledge the great gift of each other. Jesus has given them back to each other again.

But we also know that what is outside those four walls is frightening. Because the raising of Lazarus caused many people to believe in Jesus, the Jewish authorities had gotten together and made the plot to kill Jesus. In John it even says they were seeking to kill Lazarus. As a result of this plot would come the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, and all the unspeakable torment that He suffered in His Passion. This little scene in Simon's house was the Friday before Good Friday. It takes place when danger is lurking and darkness is descending.

And yet – in spite of the grumbling by the disciples which John says is really just Judas – this scene is permeated with love. There's nothing dismal or dark. There is a timeless quality to this scene. It is like heaven. They have all the time in the world, money means nothing, the concerns of the world don't matter, the plots and conspiracies to murder, the resulting nervousness and worry, all left outside the door. All that exists in this room is the Feast of the Lamb, the adoration of Jesus in His presence by people who have experienced His love, how He has healed their leprosy, given them victory over death, given them back to each other. Again, this is a picture of heaven, except for what Judas is saying. It's a beautiful picture of Jesus' church, people enjoying His benefits not separately or individually, but together, with that togetherness increasing and growing.

We need to see this larger picture to understand another one of Jesus' **"I tell you the truth"** statements. emphatically defended Mary. But His words are not simply a reaction. They apply to all Christians at all times: **"She has done a beautiful thing to Me. ... I tell you the truth, wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."**

The truth that Jesus is teaching here is about good works. He is praising the **"beautiful thing"** or the "good work" that Mary did to Him and for Him.

So Jesus is actually speaking about good works, a good thing that Mary did. This confuses us. We, who know the Gospel of grace alone, go to great lengths to be sure we understand that good works have no part in our salvation. What you do for people, what kind of husband/wife you are, how much you sacrifice, how nice and kind you are, how obedient a child you are, when it comes to eternal life it all gets thrown out. Yet here Jesus says that Mary's good work will not be thrown out. We might be tempted to hide this statement of Jesus from all those who think the essence of religion is people doing nice things for others.

But Jesus is telling the truth. What He says falls under the right, Biblical teaching concerning good works. What is a good work? It isn't any nice thing that anyone does. Good works are fruits – direct results – of faith. We are unable to do anything good by our own strength. Jesus' love, the Gospel, gives it to us.

Here Mary is such a great example. She brings **"an alabaster jar of perfume, real nard and very expensive."** It might even have been what she planned to use for anointing Lazarus' body when he died. This is for someone she loves. Now she'll give it to Jesus, overwhelmed with love for Him. We know where this love came from: from His love to her. The perfume cost more than the whole supper. She breaks the jar for one reason: to pour the whole thing on Jesus.

It is not practical. But she isn't pouring out just perfume. As it empties, she is pouring out her love. It is just beautiful. This love that comes out of Mary was

put into her by Jesus, and this is how it comes out: a sweet smell that fills the room. This is the point with anything good that we do. They are fruits of faith.

When Jesus praises Mary, He is declaring her blessedness in Him, which is what produces her act of love. He praises what He put into her. Remember that! It is who you are as a Christian: you are accepted in Him, for His sake. He declares your blessedness, and this produces every act of love which He accepts as a good work to Him. This story shows that we don't just do this individually.

The togetherness in this scene is touching – and not optional. It is part of the essence of Christianity. We are all in the room together, by faith we're all adoring the Lamb on the throne, Jesus. Feasting in His presence. Worship is receiving the benefits of His love together, and together loving Him in return. Acts of love flow from this faith and flow naturally in our life together.

Sometimes people cut themselves off from this life. They look at coming to church as a burden. They only want to know what is the least they have to do to get by. What is incredible to me is that when there is such danger lurking and darkness descending in the world around us, when people are living in such a cold, cruel world, when it is more frightening every day to raise your children in such a world, that people give themselves less to this life together! Coming to church, living this life together, is all about receiving the gifts Christ has to give. Here everything is permeated with love. There's nothing dismal or dark.

Here the concerns of the world don't matter, and the resulting nervousness and worry are all left outside the door. For in here nothing can hurt you. Nothing can cut you off from the love of Christ. Here you live inside His love, being loved by Him and loving Him in return. This picture of Jesus' church is beautiful, people enjoying His benefits not separately or individually, but together, with that togetherness increasing and growing. This is what His Church on earth is and ever will be, by His making. Amen!