

# **“Love Caught Between Joy and Pain”\***

**Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 14:43-15:47**

**Part VII of X in the Sermon Series  
“The Journey Back to Love”**

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From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Palm/Passion Sunday, Mach 28, 2021, dedicated to Dawn George for her faithfulness across the years and all the silent witnesses, and all the faithful women and men who anoint the living and the dead, who serve quietly, whose names we do not know, whose humility in loving and giving is reflected in their quiet love and always to the glory of God!

**“Love Caught Between Joy and Pain”\***

Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 14:43-15:47

Between the Palms of this Sunday and the Passion of Good Friday, there are people and stories in Mark’s Gospel that call our attention to the fullness of Jesus’ love for us. One such passage is Mark 14:3:

*While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.*

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The story of Holy Week is epic. The movement from Palms and Hosannas, to Jesus' table turning time in the temple, to his final parables, to the Last Supper, to the agony He experienced in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, to the time of trial and finally to the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross of Calvary is an epic story. It is our 2000-year-old story with a cast of thousands and epoch-shaping new beginning in the Resurrection of our Savior on Easter morning.

In the midst of all of this — there is one woman who embodies the essence of this story like none other. She is nameless. She appears on the fourth day of Holy Week with a jar of anointing oil and a heart of compassion for Jesus. She is there to focus on Jesus. She is there to care for him and to share extravagant love for him. This no-name woman is the one person pointing to his presence as God's Chosen Messiah. This no-name woman is there FOR JESUS.

In spite of her anonymity, there is absolutely nothing subtle or secret about the scene in which she appears in Mark's Gospel. The woman approaches Jesus carrying the type of fragile stone jar used to preserve precious, imported perfume. Everyone can see that she is bearing a luxurious gift — the jar itself speaks of extravagance.

Most of the witnesses are astounded when she breaks the jar rather than dispense just the amount needed for a simple gesture. Destroying it indicates that rather than hold anything back, she intends to allow the entire content of fragrant oil to flow over Jesus' head. The aroma of the oil saturates Jesus and the room where it happens. The fragrance fills the air with a bouquet of splendor which most of the disciples and close followers of Jesus

have rarely experienced. The oil drips from his head to beard to shoulders and down his body to his feet.

This anonymous anointing woman comes to Jesus during the last week of his life. She has probably witnessed his entrance into Jerusalem like a pauper king acclaimed with cries of “Hosanna!” Like everyone else in Jerusalem, she has seen his public display of anger and action in the temple. She knows his “cleansing” of the temple has infuriated the authorities. She has heard his retorts in the parable of the wicked tenants and his critique of the pretentious scribes.

By the time he is reclining at the table with Simon and friends, the air around Jesus is permeated with an aura of danger and death. All who have heard him and seen him this week, have understood that the murderous tenants of Jesus’ parable have their real-life counterparts among Jerusalem’s power elite who are plotting his death. She, like the others, can sense the sharpening of swords. She like the others, can hear the nails pounding outside the city gates as his cross on Calvary is being constructed for his execution.

At least three times, Jesus has told his disciples that he would suffer and die, only to see how they avoided facing that reality. During the final week of his life, Judas sells him out for 30 pieces of silver, and except for John who comes to the cross with him, the other 10 run and hide and Peter openly denies even knowing who he is. But during these last days of his life, when danger is in the air and the powerful are planning his demise, this one anonymous woman gives her all in an extravagant gesture of faith and love.

Often the telling of this story focuses on the complaint about waste and Jesus’ response that she is preparing him for death.

Rarely do we emphasize that her anointing is a symbolic statement that Jesus is the Christ, a title which literally means “the anointed one.”

She does not make this gesture while Jesus is at the height of his power, when crowds are flocking to his side, or even as part of the cheering crowd as he entered Jerusalem. She anoints him as his fate is becoming ever more obvious, when fickle crowds are starting to blow with the winds, as people are trending toward the crucifixion and jealous jeers will soon be crying, “Crucify him!”

Jesus looks at her and says what is obvious to at least the two of them. He acknowledges she is preparing him for death.

The anonymous anointing woman is the counterpoint to all the other disciples and to all who refuse to believe in Jesus’ message. With one extravagant gesture, she professed her belief that he, the vulnerable prophet who was surely about to die, is indeed God’s anointed one. He is the Messiah.

By pouring oil over him, she demonstrates her faith in action. She shows everyone that God is working through this man who has consistently taught that LOVE is the only law of life. Jesus is caught between joy and pain. And this woman simply and meaningfully loves him. He has given all his love to his brothers and sisters. He has shown nothing but love to all God’s children.

She gets it. As she pours her riches all over Jesus, she demonstrates that love poured out BY the Son of God needs to be reciprocated in love poured out FOR Him. She shows that wealth is worthless unless it is given away. She shows us that God is not revealed

through human power, but through the Spirit of Love Given to others.

The anointing woman is the first among all the women who stand by Jesus through his crucifixion and his resurrection as she expresses her faith and faithfulness in a gesture of love that goes far beyond every verbal proclamation. She shares Jesus’ own faith in humanity. She shows us that *“God is love in a passion which stands infinitely beyond any insult from us”* (a quote from Jesuit priest, Fr. Silvano Fausti).

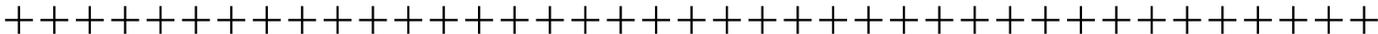
Do you know a follower of Jesus with such gentle and tender love as this? Are you a follower like this? Do you follow Jesus and care for him as she does?

In our journey back to love, I implore each of us to be like the anonymous anointing woman. On our journey back to love — act as she acted.

Rather than focus on how we too often mirror the betrayers, the deniers, the untrustworthy, the fallen and the fearful, I pray that this anonymous anointing woman teaches us how to love and live our faith in ways that go beyond human understanding.

**To be like her could cost us everything.**

But isn’t that the message and the meaning of this holy week?



\*Drawn from Sr. Mary M. McGlone’s article, “Palm Sunday: Be the Anointing Woman,” *National Catholic Reporter* online, March 27, 2021.

