

Today we again read two Gospel lessons as we continue through *The Path* this year along with our normal lectionary Gospel and Psalm readings. The first Gospel we heard is a selection from *The Path*. It is the story of the anointing of Jesus by an unnamed woman. It is shocking and memorable and filled with love. It is so powerful that Jesus said, "...wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." So this story is important.

But it is shocking. Can you imagine someone walking into a gathering of religious people and pouring expensive, wonderfully fragrant oil on the preacher? I can't. People would be confused at the very least. Some would likely try to restrain the person. Others would try to clean off the preacher. Most everyone would feel awkward and even indignant.

If we would feel like that today, imagine what it would have been like two thousand years ago. First, a woman was not supposed to interrupt a meeting of men, especially religious leaders. Women were not supposed to be out in public alone. Women were not supposed to touch men who were not their husbands or close male relatives. It was not done. And women were really, really, really not supposed to pour perfumed oil on a man.

There are other reasons why this would be disturbing to the people who witnessed this back then. In some sense, she was following what the high priest would have done to anoint a new king. That would have been done in a formal ceremony, done the right way and with the right people involved. This unnamed woman's act was much more spontaneous and done the wrong way by the wrong person.

So why did Jesus not only defend her from her male critics, but go on to say that she would be a worldwide example for all time wherever the gospel is preached? It seems startling to us if we really think about. And frankly, the church has really not focused on this story that much. Most preachers and church leaders seem to have more in common with the woman's critics than with her.

Here is why I think Jesus commended her—she got him. You see, the woman was probably a disciple of Jesus (you know, Jesus broke tradition by allowing women to follow him just like men; no other rabbi would allow that in his day). And as his disciple, she had heard Jesus say what was going to happen in Jerusalem—that he was going to be handed over to the authorities, tortured, and killed by people who thought they were doing God's will. She was attentive to him and his words and his feelings.

Like Jesus' male followers, she was probably disturbed and saddened by what he said. But unlike the men, she did not try to talk him out of it or promise to defend him against his

enemies. Instead she did in advance what women did in that culture. As Jesus said, “She has anointed by body beforehand for its burial.”

Instead of worrying about the future or arguing with Jesus about finding some other way, “she did what she could” to connect with him, support him—love him. Her action demonstrated that she believed him and what he said awaited him in Jerusalem. She understood that based on his words, she could not change that. She also knew that she could still do something to show that she loved him with her whole heart. She got him—she was with him with her whole heart.

That whole-hearted attentiveness and love are why Jesus commended her. And it is what made her fellow disciples uncomfortable. That is why they criticized her. They wanted to focus on things like how much the oil cost and what else could have been done with it. Those were distractions to ease their discomfort with her whole-hearted faith and devotion. Jesus acknowledged that it is good to care for the poor; but he also knew they were really less concerned about the poor and more concerned about avoiding their discomfort in the presence of such genuine, whole-hearted love.

So how do we take this unusual, powerful, and memorable story and translate it into our living faith today? I do not believe the point is to take this literally—taking a jar of expensive oil—worth over \$50,000 in today’s value—and pour it on the next preacher or president or pope we see. No. Jesus wants us to understand the deeper meaning of her example in two simple ways that we **ALL** can do.

First, pay attention. Pay attention to Jesus and to the people that Jesus wants us to pay attention to everyday. We can do that by making time to pray. Simple prayer is fine. We do not need to pray like a preacher to pray the way Jesus wants. Use the Lord’s Prayer. But pray it slower than we usually do. Take pauses between the phrases. And after we pray, be still and listen for the Spirit’s whispered words to us: Whom should we forgive today? Whom should we call and encourage? Whom should we do something for—not anointing them with oil, but giving grace to fill the soul of someone who needs it.

Second, do things out of our comfort zone. During our Lenten program last Wednesday, Joanie Anderton said that is what Deacon Nadine had told her and others to do in pursuing the prison ministry. When we get out of our comfort zone, we find and give grace in new ways. Some things we can do are pretty easy—write a thank you note, bake some cookies as a gift, offer to babysit a child so new parents can go out on a date. Doing easier things like these are great. When we want to go outside our comfort zone and do something more, we may feel awkward. How do we find our way there?

One way we will find our way is through Asset-based Community Development here at church. Folks are interviewing other folks to discover their gifts, their passions, and their connections to the wider community. Less than 10% of us have been interviewed so far. By the end of this year (maybe sooner), most all of us will get our turn. Some of the conversations I

have heard about started out awkwardly—people asked, “What is this about? I don’t have time to do anything more at church.” (I assure you that is not the point).

Other folks have a hard time answering questions about their gifts, their passions, and their connections. But these questions and our answers are so important. Over time we will identify and explore what we care passionately about as a community. We will recognize our gifts and offer them to God and one another in a way that excites all of us. This may be outside our comfort zone at first.

That is how the woman who anointed Jesus can be our example. She understood life is about being connected and passionate and taking risks to offer your best gifts to someone who really needs them. That is what we want to do more and more in the months and years ahead.

This approach to getting outside our comfort zone will lead us to things we did not expect. This happened to me just the other day as I spoke to someone outside the parish about a missionary who may come to speak with us next month. As we spoke, she told me about how her severely disabled son is aging out of the care the public schools give to him. She is not sure how to care for him after the school no longer helps.

As we talked, she told me about a group right down the street called Creative Enterprises. They provide day services for disabled people after they are too old for the schools. I had no idea it was there. Now I don’t know if that will be a ministry for us to do as a church; or for some of us to do as individuals; or if we will just be aware of it and pray for them. We can’t do everything. But I do know it is out of my comfort zone. That tells me it is the type of work we need to explore as part of ABCD and our life together.

Jesus told us it is important to remember the story of the woman who did something outside of her comfort zone. She used a great gift to bless Jesus when he needed special grace. She challenged those people around her then and her example continues for us today, “She has done what she could.” Amen.