

“True Love”
Psalm 118:25-29; Mark 14:3-9
A sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, Jr.

Start with a question...What does true love look like?

Some years ago, historians found a collection of 1,300 letters written by President Harry Truman to his wife, Bess. They were written over the course of 50 years. Mr. Truman had a lifelong rule that whenever he was away on business or whenever Bess left Washington for a visit to Independence, Missouri, he would write her a letter. The historians examined these letters for insights to political and diplomatic events. But what’s more impressive to us is the simple fact that even when he was dealing with the most powerful leaders of the world, Harry Truman took time to sit down and write to his wife.¹

That’s what true love looks like.

Our scripture lesson for today provides us another picture of what true love looks like. In the story of the woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany, we see what it means to give generously, extravagantly, to go far beyond what anyone would expect, for the sake of love.

This story comes at the beginning of Holy Week; a week that is unlike any other in the Church year. It is during this week that we go from the high point of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem amid a sea of welcoming palm branches, to the dark depths in his betrayal, arrest and Crucifixion. In his death on the Cross, Jesus went far beyond what others would expect; he gave himself, generously, extravagantly, for the sake of love. And in his death, Jesus shows us what love looks like.

The anointing at Bethany is a beloved story, recounted in all four Gospels, but with some differences in the details.

- Most say it took place in Bethany, but one (Luke) claims it was in Galilee;
- The timing could have been days or up to several weeks before the Passover;
- In two of the Gospels (Luke and John), the woman in the story anointed Jesus’ feet, either with ointment or with her own tears.
- And the identity of the woman varies:
 - o Matthew and Mark give her no name, calling her simply “a woman.”
 - o In Luke she is “a woman of the city who was a sinner.”
 - o And in John, she was named as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.²

Despite these differences, our attention in each account is drawn to the unnamed woman and what she did for Jesus.

- For one, she crossed an important boundary to see him. Jesus is at a banquet in the house of the host, a man called “Simon the Leper.” In ancient Palestine, women and men did not dine together at large meals. Women were only present to serve the men at table. By walking into the banquet, the unnamed woman broke the rules of social etiquette, which upset the guests to no end.
- The woman broke open a jar of nard, a very rare ointment from India, and poured it on Jesus’ head. Anointing for a big banquet in and of itself was not unusual in ancient times—it was an act of hospitality to honor a guest. What was unusual here was the extravagance of the act because the gift was so costly.
 - o There’s a story a pastor told about her father, himself a pastor, who once preached that the woman broke the container because she was so honored to be in the presence of Jesus that she

¹ “Love,” *Sermon Illustrations.com*, article on internet, accessed 4 April 2020.

² M. Eugene Boring & Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 160.

never wanted to use either the costly ointment or the container again. She broke it all out of joy at being in the presence of Jesus.³

- We live in a different time, when most of our containers are one-time use, and we quickly throw away everything from water bottles to soda cans without thinking much about it. It was not so in the ancient world—containers were used over and over because they were scarcer. Breaking the container showed it was special. Perhaps she kept its pieces as a memento of her encounter with Jesus. What do we keep as a remembrance of an important event?
- The complainers at the table, no doubt offended already by the woman’s brazenness, objected angrily: “this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor. And they scolded her” (Mark 14:5).
- Then Jesus spoke up and told them to “Let her alone; why do you trouble her?” And in the words that follow, Jesus makes clear that what this woman has done for him is an act of selfless devotion—she has anointed him for his burial.
 - I suppose the angry reaction of the other table guests should come as no surprise. Even when someone tries to do a good deed, there will always be someone who finds the “dark lining in a silver cloud.”
 - There’s a quote by Oscar Wilde, a famous 19th century English playwright, who said of some that they “know the price of everything and the value of nothing.” Here, they can name the price of the nameless woman’s wonderful gift, but they cannot see the value of what she has done for Jesus, or what Jesus is about to do for humankind.⁴
- The woman’s anointing of Jesus makes real what Peter had confessed earlier in Mark: “You are the Messiah” and Messiah, remember, means anointed one of God.
 - I think it’s significant here that Jesus accepts the anointing in preparation for his coming death. It’s a clear signal to those who were hoping the Messiah would lead them to a military victory over the Roman occupiers, that Jesus had chosen the way of suffering instead.
 - It’s significant that the woman’s name is not remembered, it’s not given at all. But what she did is remembered.

The more I think about this story, the more I’m drawn to the words of Jesus as he replies to the others at the table in verses 8 and 9:

“She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

“She has done what she could.” I think that’s an important phrase. I see it as directed not just to her, but to all followers of Jesus everywhere. The unnamed woman gave all she had to Jesus. Seems to me we are called to do the same, to give our very best, our all, to the one we call Savior. We may not do something equivalent to pouring out expensive spices over Jesus’ head; but all of us are called to “do what we can” as disciples to show God’s love, to help others, and to grow in love of God.

The nameless woman’s action here was one of lavish devotion. In pouring out her ointment on the head of Jesus, she was pouring out her love. Jesus would soon be pouring out his life on the Cross for everyone: the woman, his disciples, Simon the Leper, the complainers at the table, you and me.

God has done this for us. Have we “done what we could?”

³ Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, “Mark 14:3-9, Pastoral Perspective,” in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Eds., *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, 440.

⁴ Thomas W. Currie, “Mark 14:3-9, Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, 444.

I can't help but think of what's going on in our world today, what with the way the Coronavirus pandemic has changed our lives. I look for the good news in the ways people are responding to our situation and find, from time to time, stories of selfless acts where people **do what they can** to help others.

One example that moved me recently is the story about how thousands of former and retired healthcare workers are coming back to help fight against the Coronavirus. All of them have names, of course; but most of them will remain unknown to us. Even so, we will hear about what they do as they place their health, and their lives, at risk for the sake of others.

In addition to the former workers, there are some who had the virus, have recovered, and are heading back into the ERs to help save lives. One of the nurses who is going back after being exposed to the virus is a woman by the name of Karen Fountain. She plans to go back to her hospital in the Bronx this week, but it's not just the higher pay that motivates her. In an early April TV interview, she explained what is moving her: "I'm a little apprehensive of going back just because I know how bad it's gotten since I went into quarantine," she said. "I have to go back. There's no way not to. It's my duty. It's my job. I'm a nurse."⁵

Here is a modern-day example of a life being poured out for others. This is what love looks like.

This week, we are reminded of all that love will do. This week, we will remember, and celebrate, what Christ has done for us. Through his suffering he is identified as being at one with us. Through his death, we are reconciled with God. Through his Resurrection, we receive new life with God.

Beloved, remember what love does this week—it holds nothing back, it goes the distance, it does not fail.

I want to close with some words of love by the Apostle Paul, maybe some of the greatest words about love ever written. From Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends....And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Beloved, this week especially, remember what love does.

Do what you can.

Do it all for the love of God who has given all for us.

Amen.

⁵ Katie Young, "Need for nurses is driving record pay as coronavirus nears its peak," *CNBC.com*, April 2, 2020, article on internet, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/02/need-for-nurses-is-driving-record-pay-as-coronavirus-nears-its-peak.html>, accessed 4 April, 2020.