

IN MEMORY OF HER
THE ANOINTING WOMAN - MARK 14:3-9
Brenda M. Johnson, M.A.

Mark 14:3-9 is a prologue to Jesus' death and resurrection. It tells the story of the woman who anoints Jesus prior to his burial, and, incongruously, two days prior to his death. It illustrates Mark's penchant for uncomprehending disciples and a very human Jesus. It allows us to experience the scorn aimed at Jesus' female disciples. Most importantly, it teaches us how much Jesus appreciated the tender love and care given to him by a brave, gracious, believing woman.

Mark and his community lived in a society in which the public aspect of life was dominated by men. Jewish women were relegated to the domestic sphere and were forbidden to mix socially with men in public. Women were suspected of lust in any social contact with men.¹ Indeed, women were not allowed to meet even close male relatives unchaperoned.² "No greeting was ever to be exchanged between a man and a woman in public, not even through the agency of a third party."³ Men had to avert their gaze from women in public so that men would not be tempted or have lascivious thoughts.⁴ Although the woman with the ointment does not speak in this passage, her presence forces those at the table to look at her and, further, to speak to her. In such a society, it is highly unusual for a woman to enter a house with the purpose of pouring ointment on a man. She is criticized, ostensibly for wasting the ointment; however, the

¹Leonie J. Archer, *Her Price Is Beyond Rubies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), p. 106.

²*Ibid.*, p. 114.

³*Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁴*Ibid.*

critics may have been angry with her very presence in the room.

Jesus' female followers did not adhere to the strict code of conduct of either Pharisaical Judaism or Greco-Roman paternalism. They were seen in public with Jesus (Luke 8:1-3) and were probably scolded for doing so. The unnamed woman in this passage stands for all of Jesus' female disciples whom he protects from the scorn of others. Perhaps she is one of the few of Jesus' disciples who understands his messages about his death, and she wants to express her faith and love.

The anointing at Bethany is bracketed by two examples of furtiveness and deception. Mark 14:1-2 describes the chief priests and scribes' desire to arrest Jesus by stealth and then kill him. Mark 14:10-11 relates Judas' negotiations with the chief priests about betraying Jesus, followed by his search for an opportunity to betray. The juxtaposition of dangerous secrets with the deliberate candor and visibility of the woman with the ointment is striking. She has no fear of approaching Jesus openly; her faith and love propel her forward. In sharp contrast are the chief priests, scribes, and Judas, who cannot face Jesus. Their dishonesty compels them to lurk in the shadows. Perhaps Mark is asking us to examine our ability to face Jesus.

As Jesus sits at the table of Simon, the leper, in Bethany, a woman, bearing an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, enters. She breaks open the jar and pours the ointment on Jesus' head. In this passage, we see Jesus relaxing in the home of a (presumably) cured leper. Our interest in the story is kindled by the image of a resting Jesus, for this is unusual, especially in Mark's Gospel, with its emphasis on Jesus' actions. The active party in verse 3 is a woman walking toward Jesus and bearing a very hard, heavy, cream-colored, translucent jar of fragrant East Indian spikenard.

The reader's interest is further stimulated by the sensuousness of the scene. We can

almost feel the smooth, cool alabaster in the woman's hands; see the pure light reflected from the translucent surface; smell the aromatic unguent; and hear the seal of the jar being broken. Our sensuous experience is both interrupted and enhanced when she pours the ointment on Jesus' head. As twentieth-century Americans, with an almost fanatical desire for clean, shampooed hair, it is difficult for us to imagine enjoying ointment being poured onto one's head. If we transport ourselves back into first-century Palestine, however, we can appreciate that fragrant ointment on dry, dusty hair and skin probably felt and smelled wonderful; and we can feel Jesus' pleasure.

If we recall prior anointments in the Old Testament, the woman's actions take on another dimension. In 1 Samuel 10:1, Samuel anoints Saul as the first Hebrew king by pouring oil on his head. In 2 Samuel 2:4, the people of Judah anoint David as their king. In the beautiful Psalm 23 (The Lord is My Shepherd) we read: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Thus, in verse three, Mark has cleverly signalled Jesus as the people's designated king, of the Davidic line, anointed in the presence of enemies, yet trusting in the Lord. We now see the woman's act as honorific, as well as soothing.

The mood of satisfaction and the flow of the narrative are abruptly truncated in verse 4 by the anonymous "some were there," who angrily ask one another why the spikenard was wasted in such a way. In verse 5, these people calculate the ointment's value at more than 300 denarii, or close to a year's wages for a laborer. They then express preference for selling the nard and contributing the proceeds to the poor. Their remonstrance ends with these angry guests taking it upon themselves, as superiors and judges, to scold the woman.

Although Mark does not identify the censors, we can extrapolate from Matthew's parallel

passage (26:8), which names these censors as disciples. We can also assume that some of the inner circle of those who followed Jesus to Jerusalem were among these critics because in 10:35-45, Mark presents James and John Zebedee's presumption of glory in the face of angry disciples, a foreshadowing of 14:3-9. The disciples' presumption of the ointment's waste demonstrates their narrow-minded focus on the monetary value of physical objects, rather than the spiritual value of a selfless act. They presume waste and do not recognize that the woman's anointment of Jesus honors, indulges and, perhaps, welcomes him to another realm. In this light, the scolding that the woman receives is absurd. Her detractors are grounded in the earthly here and now, in spite of the months of training they have undergone as followers of Jesus. With no formal or official discipleship behind her, the anointing woman cuts through the facade and reaches Jesus on her own.

Jesus cuts off the scolding by telling the critics to leave the woman alone. He asks them a direct question, "Why do you trouble her?" Instead of waiting for a response, Jesus explains that the woman has done a service for him - not for the poor or anyone else. It strikes us that this is a rare instance of Jesus being served by another human being, instead of his usual *modus operandi*, serving others. It forces us to ask ourselves how we can apply our unique talents to serving God.

In verse 7, Jesus continues the theme of the refutation in verse 6 by reminding us that the poor can be shown kindness at any time, but the opportunity to show kindness to Jesus is limited. With these words, Jesus separates himself from the typical recipient of charity and cautions that he will not always be with us. He reminds us that we should always perform works of mercy, rather than letting time or money deter us from doing good.

In verse 8, Jesus emphasizes the importance of the woman's deed in two ways. First, he

states that she has done all that she could. Here, Jesus pays the woman a supreme compliment by using the absolute term "all," which signifies the rarity of her gift. Second, Jesus reveals the significance of her action: She has anointed his body for burial, paradoxically, before death and burial. We now realize that Jesus' warning of his not being with us always relates to his death, now imminent because his body has been prepared for it by the anointing. This verse seems also to be a foreshadowing of Mary of Magdalene and companions' inability to anoint Jesus' corpse because he had risen from the dead.

Jesus ends the lesson by predicting that the gospel will be spread throughout the world and that the woman's act - not words - will be told as a memorial to her. The implication of Jesus words is astonishing. Her act, at once ordinary and extraordinary, repudiated and appreciated, has earned the woman a place in history. If Mark did write for a Roman community, his description of the anointing would have appealed to Roman Christian women because:

Their self-understanding as the new eschatological community, the new creation, the new humanity, in which the social-political stratifications of religion, class, slavery, and patriarchal marriage are abolished, and all are equal in Christ, was an alternative vision that clearly undermined the Greco-Roman patriarchal order.⁵

Roman women, searching for an alternative to the confinement of their personhood, would have

⁵Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), p. 265.

taken heart in the story of the woman who anointed Jesus.

Mark 14:3-9 deals primarily with the perception of value and worthiness. It is replete with paradoxes that force the reader to question one's sense of reality. Simon is a leper; is he clean or unclean, saved or damned? The ointment is costly; was it wasted or put to good use? Those in Simon's house are angry with the woman; are they genuinely indignant or actually embarrassed at their failure to welcome Jesus properly? The poor could have benefited from the sale of the nard; can an act of mercy benefit psychologically as well as physically? Jesus' body is prepared for burial before his death; is this moment of indulgence enough to prepare Jesus for death and resurrection? The woman is scolded by her fellow human beings, yet Jesus congratulates her and promises her immortality. How can we earn Jesus' praise and reward?

The woman is the only one in the passage who clearly sees who Jesus really is. She acts on that understanding and does the very best she can to manifest her faith and love by offering Jesus some human comfort. With Jesus' promise of remembrance, we perceive that this act transcends the encounter in the house at Bethany, two days before the crucifixion. The woman with the alabaster jar of spikenard is every person who manifests faith and love for Jesus. By helping him prepare for the worst ordeal imaginable, the woman has earned not only Jesus' support and gratitude, but also immortality. She is, in short, a paragon for all humankind.

Brenda M. Johnson, M.A.
Copyright 1999
Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women
All Rights Reserved
www.mountsaintagnes.org