

March 22, 2020
Rev. Kerry Smith

Mark 14:3-9 The First Dinner: Risking Rejection
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 14:3-9 New Revised Standard Version

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. But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. 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.”

There is a picture on the front of your bulletin of the woman anointing Jesus’ feet. In Luke and John the woman pours the perfume on Jesus’ feet, but in Matthew and Mark it is on his head. Head or feet, imagine the smell filling the room. This Lent we are talking about the events that took place during the last week of Jesus’ life so that we might picture ourselves in the story. With whom do you identify in the picture? With the people at table, the disciples? What would you be complaining about as this woman interrupts your meal?

Jesus is at a home where he can be home among friends. We don’t know who Simon the leper is. Perhaps he is the man whom Jesus healed from leprosy. The Greek tells us that Jesus isn’t simply seated at the table, he is reclining at the table. He is relaxed, no one is testing him, no one is asking to be healed. He can simply be. The woman comes and anoints Jesus, in Mark’s version, on his head. That is what you would do for a king. It is an extravagant gift of devotion and love.

In Mark’s Gospel Jesus says this anointing is to prepare his body for burial. Maybe that’s why this woman’s actions make the disciples uncomfortable because they cause Jesus to talk about his own death. Jesus’ words scare them so they complain and get angry to hide their own fear.

The Bible is so interesting to me because the stories are a little bit different in the different Gospels. Each gives us different messages and different images. In Mark and Matthew’s Gospel the woman is unnamed. John’s Gospel says the woman is Mary, the sister of Martha. Luke’s Gospel calls her a sinner from the city. She wasn’t invited to the party but she comes anyway. She walks into a gathering of strangers risking insult and humiliation. The disciples begin to complain. There were looks of judgement and outrage on the faces around the table. The disciples were not moved by her generosity and her outpouring of emotion.

The woman never speaks in this story, but Jesus does. He comes to her defense. If we have power, we need to use it for good, and that good entails speaking up on behalf of others.¹ It’s almost as if Jesus is saying on that day, at that time, this woman knew what I needed, even more than I knew myself. We know almost nothing about this anointing woman: Did she spend her last denarius on the ointment, or did she have more at home? Did she seek to anoint Jesus as a king—because that is what anointing on the head can signal—or did she hear his predictions and know that he would suffer and die? Or was she simply trying to do something nice for him? Her actions make me think of Psalm 23, “Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. *Entering the Passion of Jesus*. Kindle page 101.

So often when we hear this story, we are drawn to Jesus' words, "For you always have the poor with you." Those words are also in Deuteronomy 15:11, "Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land" (Common English Bible). In John's Gospel it is Judas who criticizes the woman's actions and complains that the money could have been better spent on the poor. We know we're not supposed to agree with Judas because in the next scene Judas betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

We always have the opportunity to provide for others and we are asked to care for those for whom God cares. We know money must be given. We know we must serve others. We know unjust systems must be overthrown and oppressive systems must be disrupted. Maybe Jesus knows that the disciples aren't concerned for the poor but are instead annoyed with the unexpected guest. As Jesus prepares for the road ahead, he accepts her gift. She poured perfume on his body. For this woman, following Christ is being with Christ in radical, risky solidarity. She doesn't let anything get in her way of being fully present for Jesus. In that extravagant gift, Jesus and this unnamed woman saw each other for who they were. The most fundamental act of faith is being with someone. Standing with them. True presence. Radical solidarity.

For three months, from March to May in 2011, world-famous pioneer performance artist Marina Abramovic carried out a performance art piece called "The Artist Is Present" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. For seven hours a day, six days a week, Abramovic sat in a simple wooden chair at a simple wooden table. She held an almost unchanging posture. She did not speak, eat, or get up. Across the table from her sat another wooden chair, and one at a time people were invited to come take a seat. People waited in line for hours to see her. Some even camped out overnight. People came from all over the world. Celebrities came, Marisa Tomei, James Franco, even Lady Gaga. Some people came multiple times. Some sat with her for only a few minutes, others for hours. Many left with tears still flowing down their cheeks. By the end of her exhibit in May, the piece had become one of the most famous pieces of performance art ever.

Marina Abramovic sat in her chair and opened her eyes when each new visitor was placed before her, and then, for as long as they sat there, she would stare at them. Stare deeply into their eyes. She would not move or speak or judge, though sometimes she, too, would weep. For more than 700 hours, Abramovic performed the art of being truly fully present to another human being, one person at a time.

Abramovic's project earned her the adoration of some, the curiosity of many others, and no small amount of scornful eye-rolling. Critics questioned how her piece qualified as art and called her a diva. Skeptics joked that there were surely better uses of her time, and the curious wondered about the logistics of it all. And through all of it, Marina sat and was present. In a documentary on the project, she said that she realized that in the world of today she could only be fully present to each person if there were nothing else in life to distract her. The half million people who came to experience this way of "being seen" make it clear that we live in a time when true presence has become a radical idea.²

Would we allow ourselves to be broken open like jars of alabaster? Would we dare to stare deep into another's eyes so the other is seen and known and loved? Would we do this not just in an art exhibit, but in our daily lives, in our schools, at our work, in our church pews? Let's try. There is no better time and no better opportunity than today. Let's risk. Let's step outside the

² Story told by Rev. Shannon Kershner at Fourth Church Presbyterian in Chicago.

comfort zone of our faith. Turn to your neighbor and call them. Reach out to someone who lives alone and check on them. Don't be afraid. Stand with one another. True presence. Radical solidarity. We can do this because we have been called to do it today, right now. Thanks be to God, Amen.