

Entering the Passion of Jesus – Chapter 4

The First Dinner: Risking Rejection

Gathering for the “First Supper”

“It would be nice if Lenten observances started with a ‘first supper,’ a celebration of the woman who anoints Jesus. Jesus states, ‘Truly [that is, “amen”] I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mark 14:9). Do we tell the story in her memory?”

“The connection between the Temple and this First Supper—as well as the Last Supper—had already been anticipated in Mark’s Gospel. The events at the First Supper connect, over and over again, with the story of the poor widow whom he just met. Each story concerns a single woman, distinguished from among the more privileged people, who displays an extravagant gift. In each case she is silent, and in each case Jesus honors her by valuing her action. We are to see the first woman but we are to tell the story of the second.”

“This is an opening for us to talk not only about this one unnamed woman, but about all those women in the Gospels whose stories are not remembered and not told.”

The Women Who Followed Jesus

A lengthy study could do done on the women who follow Jesus. In addition to the anointing woman in our present story, we have Anna the widow in the Temple, Mary Magdalene, the mother of James and John, Joanna and Susanna, Mary and Martha, the daughters of Jerusalem who weep for Jesus. Also, the various women for whom Jesus grants a healing—the Canaanite SyroPhoenician woman with her demon possessed daughter, Peter’s mother in law, the widow of Nain whose son Jesus raises, the bent over woman in the synagogue, and the women who watch Jesus’ crucifixion and come to his tomb to anoint him. All have their own stories.

“They followed Jesus *not* because they were seeking freedom from some sort of repressive Jewish system that devalued them; they followed Jesus because he spoke to their heart and healed their bodies, and they found peace in his presence.”

“When we tell the story of the Passion, do we remember to tell the story of the anointing woman whose identity has been lost? Jesus himself calls for her remembrance. He is telling us that when we tell *his* story, we must tell her story as well.” And it should do more than convey information, it “should motivate and inspire, console and provide courage.”

The Woman—or Women—who Anoint

“Matthew and Mark basically tell us the same story about an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus’ head at the beginning of Passion Week; John names the woman as Mary the sister of Martha, and in John’s account, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet. Luke is the outlier because Luke depicts the anointing as coming before Jesus starts to move to Jerusalem. In Luke, the setting is also at the home of a fellow named Simon, but this one is a Pharisee rather than a man cleansed of leprosy. The anointing woman, identified by Luke as a sinner from the city, anoints Jesus’ feet. This narrative is not about anointing him for his burial and not about his kingship, but honoring him and showing her gratitude to him.”

“Do we know the names of the people who seek the same things we do? Might we learn from an outsider? And in some cases, might we risk being an outsider who can do what those on the inside can’t, or won’t.”

Mary Took a Pound of Costly Perfume...

We might think of the four accounts we find in the Gospels as variations on a theme. All of them are “correct” in that each one has the same basic structure, and yet all of them are different. “The Gospel writers sing the good news with their own rhythms and we should appreciate them all.”

“In John’s version, we learn that after Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, ‘the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume’... John wants us to experience the Gospel viscerally; not only by reading the words, but with sight and sound, smell and taste. The good news should impact our senses, so that the world we encounter in its light, its sound, and its taste, is transformed.”

“A woman anointed Jesus—who, where, when, why, and to what result? Each time we tell the story, the details may change. And that’s okay. What story do we tell? How do we tell the story? And what do we proclaim not only in memory of Jesus but also ‘in memory of’ that risk taking woman.”