

*"The Last Two Friends of Jesus:
The Woman with the Jar and Simon the Bystander"*
(2012 Lenten Series #5)

03/25/12

Mark 14:3-9 & 15:21-24

I. DR. ALAN CULPEPPER AT THE MCAFEE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY IN ATLANTA SAYS THAT WHEN WE REACH THIS POINT IN JESUS' JOURNEY, WHEN HE ARRIVES OUTSIDE OF JERUSALEM, "THE EVENTS BEGIN TO MOVE SWIFTLY...THE STEADY DRUMBEAT OF RISING CONFLICT LEADING TO JESUS' CRUCIFIXION" IS FASTER AND FASTER.

A. ***Mark's account of the way the Passion of Jesus ends in his death is brief.***

1. Mark never explains why something happens in "this miscarriage" of justice...
 - a. *why* Jesus was at the home of Simon the leper, of justice
 - b. *why* the solitary bystander Simon is forced to carry the cross.
2. The last few days of the life of Jesus prevent anyone from being sentimental!
3. It is "stark and emotionally devastating!"
 - a. The last few hours on Friday are a horror film.
 - b. If I compare two different portrayals of Jesus' last week in our culture, I might compare novelist Nikos Kazantzakas' "The Last Temptation of Christ," with say, Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ."
 - c. Kazantzakas sentimentalizes; Gibson gives a violent and painful view.
4. *Mark never says in his Passion account that Jesus died for the sins of his people.*
 - a. John says it quite emphatically; so does the apostle Paul.
5. At the moment of his death, ironically, Mark reveals Jesus' true divinity.
6. At the same hour Jesus' death brings us salvation.
 - a. Friday evening at sundown the Jews prepare to celebrate God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt.
 - b. That same day, in the afternoon, Jesus prepares for the salvation of all of God's people of faith. [PAUSE]

B. ***In the 14th chapter we find what the commentators call "a Marcan sandwich."***

1. The anointing by an unnamed woman is the inside or meat of the sandwich, that which gives it flavor and nourishment for the soul.
 - a. On day on a car trip I began eating a sandwich that I had made. I could not believe how tasteless and dry I found it to be, only to discover I had left out the slices of fresh meat and the cheese.
 - b. The outside of the sandwich, one piece of bread consists of the religious authorities plotting to kill Jesus.
 - (1) The contract Judas makes with them is the other slice of bread.
2. Author John Painter has suggested a further bracketing based on this woman's selfless generosity in breaking her alabaster jar and pouring the precious nard over Jesus' head and the widow who gives her last two coins in Mark 12.
3. Each woman's gift here is a pre-meditated act of faith; yet they remain strangers to us.
 - a. The gift of Simon the bystander just in from the countryside is accidental, a spur of the moment emergency measure forced upon him.
 - b. But even such accidental incidents may create faith and discipleship.

C. ***So, the plot thickens, the time gets closer and closer, the days grow darker.***

1. Those around Jesus fall away and distance themselves.
2. The crowds who once followed him hopeful for a miracle turn ugly, they are against him,
3. His suffering is intense, as I imagine is his loneliness.

4. The disciples are in a daze, their comprehension of what their master is going through is fragmentary; all they can do is watch.
5. But Jesus' face is set, he is determined. He knows he must die
6. And soon there are only two left who will reach out to him: this woman with the flask and Simon with the cross.
 - a. Were they both strangers?
 - b. *"I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you cared for me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, Lord, when was it ... Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you do did it to me'"* (Matthew 25:35)
 - c. Ann Weems is a Presbyterian minister's daughter. She writes in her little book, *"Kneeling in Jerusalem,"*

*"When the journey gets too hard,
when we feel depleted,
when our compassion turns to complaining,
when our efforts toward
justice and mercy
seem to get us nowhere,
(it is) time to remember the humility part-
that it is God who has made us
and not we ourselves;
that the saving of the world
or even one part of it
is not on our shoulders. (short pause)
It is then we can come unto him,
and he will give us rest.
With rest we'll remember
what it is we are about. "*
 - d. This is what the woman and Simon did. They did not try to save the world, they ministered to one, they befriended one, regardless of their motives or their circumstances.

II. So JESUS IS IN THE HOME OF MARK THE LEPER. IT IS SUPPER TIME. THE WOMAN COMES IN WITH HER ALABASTER JAR.

A. ***As I said earlier, Mark wants to move rapidly through the action with few details, no explanations.*** (By the way, he handles the resurrection in the same manner. So do Matthew and Luke.)

1. Is Jesus an overnight house guest in Bethany? or just there for dinner?
 - a. I cannot see him in the mood to go to a dinner party.
 - b. Bethany however is just over the river and up in the highlands from Jericho, two miles from Jerusalem.
2. Are any of the disciples present?
 - a. One other account has at least Judas present, because he complains strongly about what the woman does.
3. Elsewhere this woman is called "Mary," often confused with some of the other Mary's who followed Jesus.
 - a. The truth is we know very little about her.
 - b. She may be a member of Simon's household. (page 2)

- c. One thing we do know, she is a woman with her own resources and wealth, because this jar contains pure nard, from a plant grown in India, and usually stored in alabaster flasks—all of which carries a stiff price.
4. Mark at times seems to make the assumption that his readers are familiar with these local personalities like Simon the leper.
 - a. But here he intimates as he did with the beggar at Jericho, that personal identity is not important. It is what she does, or he does, it is the response of faith which alone matters,
 - b. the faith which gives all you have to give-- your last two coins.
5. The woman here provides the meat of this Marcan sandwich, and the men provide the distasteful framework with their complaints and criticism.
 - a. Mark implies a deeper meaning of everything she does.
 - b. Whatever the authorities or the disciples and Judas say is falsely evident on the surface.
6. The storyteller teases us with a potential hint of scandal:
 - a. the woman's reputation,
 - b. she lets her hair down - only women with loose morals do that!
 - c. she then in an all-too-familiar gesture wipes Jesus' feet with her hair.
 - d. She has wasted something of great value in a brief foolish moment.
7. Now Jesus, who is deeply touched by her passion for him, her selfless gift, counters the men's grumbling and condemnation:
 - a. And we understand that this anointing is a messianic announcement, for only kings are anointed.
 - b. It is an act of gracious hospitality.
 - c. Her extravagant gift is more than it appears: she is preparing Jesus her Lord for his death, and for his glory beyond that.
 - d. Even this woman is unaware of the totality of her act.
8. Jesus stops the men short in their condemnation: "Lay off her!" or something like, "Shut up! Why do you criticize her?"
 - a. There is a proper time to give to the poor. They will always be around you. Any day you can help them out which probably none of you do.
 - b. And there is a time for a spontaneous act of love.
 - c. Needy folks traveling through town today show up at our church asking for help. It is really difficult to know whom to help because I also know there is a "network" out there where phone numbers pass around, and names of where to stop and ask.
9. Here is the Gray Poupon, the connoisseur's condiment, inside the sandwich!
 - a. Jesus boldly informs the self-righteous men in the room, "*What this woman has done will be heard and remembered in all the world!*"
 - b. just as what Jesus is about to do will be proclaimed in all the world.
10. His response is powerful, heartwarming.
 - a. He affirms this woman and her act of charity! **[PAUSE]**

III. THERE IS A TIME FOR OUR EVERY DAY DUTIES OF FAITH AND LIFE, AND THERE ARE THOSE RARE OPPORTUNE MOMENTS WHEN SOMETHING SPECIAL COMES OUR WAY. WE BETTER BE ABLE TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE AND BE PREPARED TO RESPOND BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE...JUST LIKE THE MOMENT THE STRANGER SIMON APPEARED IN JERUSALEM IN THE MIDST OF THE CROWD WATCHING THE PARADE TO THE CRUCIFIXION.

A. ***We call this a kairós moment,***

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1. It is a moment when God's time intersects ours, and God takes over our lives and runs the show. And after it is all over, we know it, and our life is dramatically changed forever.
 2. Do any of you remember the old science fiction TV show, "The Outer Limits" which ran from 1963-1965 on ABC?
 - a. The announcer attempted to make us think our time and space was being co-opted, pre-empted:
 - b. *"There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. If we wish to make it louder, we will bring up the volume. If we wish to make it softer, we will tune it to a whisper. We will control the horizontal. We will control the vertical..... For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all that you see and hear. ...You are about to participate in a great adventure. You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to — The Outer Limits.*
- B. *By way of comparison here is an absolute stranger, known to no one except, paradoxically, his name Simon.***
1. A Jewish pilgrim, a Roman, a Canaanite, or merchant?
 - a. Just as the woman's name does not matter, here Simon's background is of no use to Mark.
 - b. Simon the Leper in the first story plays no role. Simon the stranger plays a critical role. *He is the very last person to reach out and help the Lord before he is crucified.*
 2. And we are told he is the father of two sons, Alexander and Rufus,
 3. the second being thought to be the name of a Christian believer mentioned later by Paul in Romans 16.13.
 - a. *"Greet also, Rufus, who is chosen in the Lord."*
 - b. We know the names of his two sons are not Jewish.
- C. *This stranger now before the whole frenzied mob is "compelled" to carry the cross.***
1. Typically Mark, he chooses not to tell us why.
 2. From history we know that slaves or hired men often carried the cross beam of the cross for those condemned to be executed, not the whole thing, as if to mistakenly suggest Jesus must drag the ten-foot cross across the ground until he collapses.
 - a. *"If anyone would be my disciple, let that person carry their own cross." ... For whoever wishes to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35).*
 3. Why does Mark include this short episode of Simon? It is hard to tell.
 - a. Our imagination now comes into play:
 - b. Jesus is a beaten, bleeding, defeated human.
 - c. *"Ecce homo!"* Pilate announces as he presents Jesus after scourging him: *"Behold the man!"*

(a) In the suffering and death of Jesus, no man or woman lies beyond his love and mercy, beyond his ability to save, not even a complete stranger lost in the crowd. And this stranger stands out against all the other strangers, all the righteous religious leaders, Jesus' own family,

- d. even his disciples on that Friday afternoon. His journey has ended.
A few lyrics from a song in the old musical, "Kismet," kind of set the mood for me.

*"I saw your face and I ascended
Out of the commonplace into the rare
... Don't send me in dark despair..
From all that I hunger for
 But open your angel's arms
To this stranger in paradise
And tell him that he need be
A stranger no more."*

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And may the children of God now respond... "Amen!"