

Proper 12 (17) 10th Sunday after Pentecost - July 28, 2024

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–10; Psalm 133; 2 Corinthians 2:14–16; Mark 14:3–9

“You can do good”

1. People in ancient and modern Palestine are well known for their hospitality
 - a. They consider it such an honor to take care of a guest
 - i. There are biblical stories of strangers passing by being invited for a meal and to stay overnight (like with Abraham inviting the visitors who, as it turns out, were angels from God)
 - ii. There are even stories which expand the meaning of hospitality, going above and beyond what one would expect, or even consider safe (like the parable of the Good Samaritan who took care of a wounded traveler, taking him to a hotel and paying to ensure his recovery)
 - b. I had the chance to experience some lavish hospitality in Palestine when our presbytery sent a group on a study trip
 - i. People opened their homes to us, complete strangers, because we came introduced by someone they trusted
 - ii. They not only fed us amazing food, they also took the time to tell us about their life
 - iii. More precious than money, they trusted us with their stories of faith and sacrifice, of struggle under military occupation, and we felt both honored and charged with sharing their stories when we returned home
 - c. What one has to remember is that the lavish hospitality can be viewed both as a standard of the gift but also of the generosity with which it was given.
 - i. In the same trip to Kenya I was telling you about last week, I was hosted by a wealthy family.
 1. The matriarch was one of the leaders in the church where I preached
 2. Her home was large and well furnished.
 3. Our meals there felt luxurious and were lovingly offered to us guests
 - ii. But I likewise recall meals during other church-related trip in the homes of not wealthy hosts in Kenya, or Philippines or Thailand, where the chicken or goat or pork which was set before us on their humble table was an extravagant gift to us, since I knew full well our hosts themselves didn't eat that way on a daily basis, maybe not even having meat but a couple of times a week.
2. So, consider the Mark passage today from the perspective of hospitality and pay attention to the woman who offers an extravagant gift to Jesus as part of that hospitality.
 - a. It isn't readily clear if the woman was the host. In fact, it doesn't look like she was
 - b. She was probably a guest, just as Jesus was.
 - c. But she took it upon herself to honor this special guest with an expensive ointment
 - d. We might not be as familiar with anointing as a part of life.
 - i. Anointing had some ritual / religious uses within the context of a life of faith
 - ii. There is also anointing when a king was selected (like David)
 - iii. And there is also anointing at the end of life, preparing a body for burial

- iv. Still, there was a custom of anointing guests as part of how a host would make a special guest feel welcome <https://www.biblicalcyclopedia.com/A/anoint.html>
 - e. It is good to point out that this story we read takes place in the week we call “Holy Week” so Jesus would have been getting himself emotionally and spiritually ready for his trial and crucifixion
 - f. So when the woman in the story anoints Jesus with a very expensive ointment, it is as if she’s not only welcoming the special guest, but is unknowingly preparing his body for burial as well, as Jesus explained to his disciples.
 - g. We may not get an important detail about the woman (her name) but we do get a detail about the ointment.
 - i. The origin of the word for this type of ointment is a Sanskrit word, so the ointment may have comes from India. A similar ointment is mentioned in the context of what a king would have used. Song of Solomon 1:12
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3487/kv/tr/0-1/>
 - ii. In other words: it’s very very special
 - h. Which is why, it may seem reasonable for the disciples, or at least some of them, to have groused about the extravagance of the gift
 - i. She could have used some regular olive oil ,and instead sold the expensive stuff (worth a year’s salary) and given that money to the poor!
 - ii. It isn’t clear what the disciples were really complaining about
 - iii. We don’t have any other stories where the generosity of the people who gave them food and drink was questioned, or ridiculed, asking for the cash instead.
 - iv. Don’t forget that Jesus and the disciples were traveling preachers who depended on the hospitality (the famous Palestinian hospitality) of those they taught and healed.
 - i. Jesus redirects his disciples by pointing out they can (and should) do good any day
 - i. It is a very odd exchange.
 - ii. Though that day the woman had made a special gesture of love and respect for him, it needed to be understood as a gift beyond the high price of the ointment
 - iii. Because, Jesus says, the poor are always with you, but I won’t be around much longer
 - iv. That’s a part of the passage which may take us down a rabbit hole
 - v. The “always with you” isn’t meant to be a despairing statement (“Well, what can you do! We’ll never get rid of poverty so why even try!”) but I suggest to you that it is almost like a statement of ongoing injustice which is pervasive (“well, you know someone is always going to try to take advantage of people – so while the reign of God isn’t fully with us yet, you get busy doing good!”)
3. We’ve had the stories of two faithful, generous women on back to back Sundays
 - a. Last week it was a widow who was giving her last two pennies.
 - i. She was at the temple giving from the bottom of her purse, as it were
 - ii. And Jesus praised her, saying that while others gave out of their abundance, she had given out of her lack. She was presented as an example.

- b. This week is another woman, a very wealthy woman giving an extravagant gift to Jesus.
 - i. She is honoring Jesus and his place in the community
 - ii. And Jesus praised her, saying we would still be talking about her today
 - c. The poor widow was almost not seen.
 - d. The wealthy woman unwillingly received attention by her extravagant action.
 - e. A resource calls these women spiritual sisters, with both of them “incredibly benevolent”
 - i. and in addition both of them deeply invested in two causes which would soon seem to be no more (the temple would be destroyed, and Jesus would be crucified/raised)
 - ii. both did what they could
 - iii. both were somehow unaware of the example they were setting by their actions <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/triumphal-entry-or-anointing-at-bethany/commentary-on-mark-111-11-143-9>
4. These two women represent for us examples to follow, along with the words of Jesus giving context to their generosity
- a. You are a very generous congregation, both with your financial support and with your time and effort.
 - b. You and those who have come before us have entrusted us with a physical building, financial endowments, and spiritual legacies which are rich in meaning and importance.
 - c. You seek to be faithful in what you do, and for 200 years this congregation has sought to dig to the bottom of its purse to give gladly, even sacrificially.
 - d. And you have sought to do good, taking care of each other, and taking a leading role in helping take care of the community.
 - e. Our call as we enter our third century is to continue in that trajectory of service, faithfulness and generosity.
5. Some of us will contribute our own version of two pennies, some of us our own version of an extravagant ointment, all of us will be focused on living out our faith in worship and in doing good.