

May 27, 2012

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Broken and Poured Out

John 12:1 – 11

Many years ago in India, a man, his wife and two children were converted to Christ. Their spontaneous faith spread throughout the village, angering the leader of the community. He summoned the man before the village and demanded that he renounce his Christian faith or face execution. The man, facing this crucial decision, sang a song that I have sung many times, but never in circumstances like these: ***“I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.”***

Enraged, the chief ordered his archers to shoot the two children. As both of the boys lay twitching on the ground, the chief asked, “Now will you renounce your faith? You have lost both of your children. You will lose your wife as well.” The man replied by singing, ***“Though none go with me, still will I follow. Though none go with me, still will I follow. Though none go with me, still will I follow. No turning back, no turning back.”***

The chief was beside himself with rage and he ordered the wife put to death. Now he asked for the final time, “Now I will give you one more opportunity to deny your faith and live. There is no one for you in the world.” The man then sang, ***“The cross before me, the world behind me. The cross before me, the world behind me. The cross before me, the world behind me. No turning back, no turning back.”***

Eventually the testimony of Jesus and the courage of this man and his family would lead to the conversion of this chief and the entire village, but he didn't know that at that time. He was simply committed to Christ at a level most of us have trouble understanding. His commitment was such that when it came time to be broken and poured out for Christ he didn't hesitate, he didn't waffle, he didn't have to even think about it. And that is what the text tells us today. Followers of Christ are not called simply to obey Him, although we do. They are not called simply to imitate Him, yet that is our desire. It is as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, ***‘When Christ calls a man to follow Him, He bids him come and die’***. That is He calls us to total commitment. Following Jesus is to be broken and poured out for Him. We may not be called to physically die for the cause of Christ – but Bonhoeffer understood something that is fundamental to the call of Christ. He understood that responding to the gospel means that we are all in – no matter what. We are broken and poured out – we are irrevocably committed to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him to Calvary.

Jesus cannot be known apart from absolute commitment – He can't be sampled, or simply tried, or on a money-back guarantee trial. You must put all your weight on Him – you must make yourself absolutely vulnerable to Him. You can't know Him any other way. Being broken and poured out for Christ means that you are committed to Him all the way – you either have all of Him or none of Him. You cannot say, 'Come in Savior – stay out Lord – come in Comforter – stay out Master'. You are either broken and poured out, or you remain intact and self-contained. And this is what is going on in this story.

The setting of this story is in Bethany six days before the Jewish Passover. Keep in mind that His trial and scourging and crucifixion are just six days in the future. ***Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.*** John 12:1-2 Here in this passage, John doesn't tell us anything about whose house this was, but both Matthew and Mark have accounts of this incident and they tell us that this supper took place in Simon the leper's house. Although the Bible doesn't say it, Simon must have been cured from his leprosy otherwise they wouldn't have been eating in his house, he wouldn't have even had a house to eat in. And it's very likely that Simon's leprosy had been cured by Jesus since there was no other cure in existence.

So they are having a supper there in Jesus' honor, and Lazarus is there as well as Mary and Martha – and Martha is very much in character – she takes charge and we see her busy serving everybody – but Jesus and Lazarus it says are reclining at table. And I can imagine they had an interesting conversation, what with Lazarus being dead for four days, no doubt in Abraham's bosom, and then having to return. And the text also tells us that there were apparently a lot of other people there, not eating with the principles, but sort of gawking: ***The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead.*** John 12:9

At banquets like this with famous or important people present, it was customary for the invited guests to eat while surrounded by onlookers who had somehow won the privilege to stand around the perimeter and simply watch them eat. It was considered an honor just to be in the room with them. And there were two really famous guests at this dinner so I can imagine this place was packed out.

And right in the middle of this scene, Mary comes in and does something so remarkable, so astounding, so incredibly impractical that everyone in the room is suddenly engaged in it. *Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.* John 12:3 When Mary came in with this, I don't think anyone at first was very surprised at what they thought she was going to do. At gatherings like this it was not only customary, but essential that the host or hostess provided the guests with some sort of aromatic oil or perfume to anoint their heads. Back in that day before refrigeration and deodorant and body sprays, all the things that make for polite society, people had to have a way to deal with the smells that happened when groups of people got together in that hot and humid climate. And so it was customary for perfumes and scents to be sprinkled fairly liberally to sort of envelope you in a protective aroma. And I'm sure that is what people thought she was going to do – take this very expensive perfume and dab a bit on His head.

But Mary does something totally unexpected. In this account John focuses on the fact that she anointed His feet. But Mark tells us something more. She actually takes the container and breaks it, and pours the whole thing on Him. Mark says she started with His head: *and she broke the vial and poured it over His head.* That was sixteen ounces of liquid perfume – and not just any perfume. It was nard, or spikenard, which is a plant that can be crushed and distilled into an intensely aromatic amber-colored oil which is very thick in consistency. And it was expensive. Judas says that it was worth at least 300 denarii. And to put it in perspective, 300 denarii would equal a working man's wages for one year.

Think about it. I don't know how much you make in a year – \$30,000, \$60,000, \$90,000? Whatever it is, just imagine dumping a year's wages over someone's head. Which is why the reaction of not just Judas here, which is the only one John records, but the reaction of the whole room, which Mark tells us, was a fairly violent one. Mark tells us that when Mary did this, they rebuked her harshly. And again that is almost a euphemism. Mark uses the same word John uses to describe Jesus' reaction when He came to Lazarus' tomb in chapter 11, and we learned that the word means to bellow with anger or to snort or roar like an animal. So what we see here is that what Mary did was so offensive, so disgusting, so impractical – that pretty much the whole room started yelling at her.

So what is it that she did? She did three things – three unexpected, offensive and scandalous things. First of all she didn't just pour a few drops of this perfume on Jesus. Mark tells us that she took an alabaster vial containing the perfume and broke it and poured it out. It's all out – even if you saved some there's nothing to put it back into. It was so much that John says *the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.* It filled the whole house – it was everywhere. Thankfully John doesn't record what must have been the reaction of her sister Martha who was probably in the kitchen busy with the serving. She probably smelled the aroma as it filled the house and came running out to ask if Mary had just lost her mind.

Because you see the perfume was in an alabaster vial which undoubtedly meant that it was a family heirloom. Nobody keeps something worth a year's wages just lying about the house. It was something that people did in those days as a hedge against disaster. This was something you kept safe and only brought out if you lost everything else. It was almost certainly the most valuable thing that Mary owned. That is why this is so startling and astounding to everyone. They probably thought 'That's nice, Mary is going to give Him a bit of the good stuff'. But Mary takes the whole thing, breaks it open and pours it all out, and everybody roars at her. That's the first thing.

Then she does something even more offensive and startling – she anoints not only His head as Mark tells us, but kneels down and anoints His feet. This was in a time and a place that doing anything with someone's feet was seen as unbelievably disgusting and demeaning. You would never ask anyone to deal with your feet – that would be too humiliating – too demeaning. And then she does something by the standards of that day that was completely scandalous – she lets down her hair. She would have had to. John says that she wiped His feet with her hair. In that day and culture, a woman would never let down her hair in public – that was reserved for the intimacy of the home, not public banquets. And the crowd bellowed at her. And we can imagine that they were at least shouting, 'Where's your sense of propriety – where's your sense of proportion?' And we can also hear Jesus responding. 'Leave her alone – her sense of proportion is just right!'

What is going on here? What is it that Mary is doing? In all three of these things – breaking the box and anointing His feet and wiping them with her hair, Mary is saying 'I will be broken and poured out for You. I am not going to respond to Jesus conditionally. I am not putting any boundaries on my commitment to Him.' When she breaks the box, first of all she is saying '**My commitment to Jesus is not conditioned by cost**'. In other words she was not saying, 'I'll follow you as long as it is not too expensive – I'll follow You as long as it is practical – I'll follow You as long as I don't have to give up too much – I'm willing to be broken and poured out for You'. That's the first thing.

The second thing is that she anoints His feet – she goes further. I have to say something here about the concept of slavery in the Bible. When the Bible talks about slavery we must understand that it wasn't slavery in the sense that we have come to know it in the western world, particularly here in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That was a brutal kind of dehumanizing slavery that was unknown for the most part in the ancient world. In Palestine, when a Jewish person fell into unpayable debt, they couldn't simply declare bankruptcy as people do now. They had to go into what we would call indentured servitude. They would have to go to work for someone to pay it off and as a result they lost some of their rights. But they did have rights. The rabbis constantly brought up the fact that these people had not lost all their rights, and there were some things you couldn't ask that person to do. And one of the things they said that you must not do is to ask your servant to unlatch your shoes. Which explains where John saw himself in relation to Jesus when he said of Him: '*It is He who comes after me, the thong, or the latch, of whose sandal I am not worthy to loose*'.

But here is what Mary is saying- 'I know that even slaves have rights, but I give them up. I know that there are things that even servants cannot be compelled to do, but I lay down those rights. I give them up – I give up my control – I give up my rights to self-determination. **There is nothing you cannot ask of me**'. She was saying what Pastor Tim Keller says in his book, *The Prodigal God*: '*If it is really true that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace – at God's infinite cost – then there's nothing he cannot ask of me.*'

But there is a third thing – a deeper place of being broken and poured out. Mary doesn't just anoint Jesus' feet with her hands, but she lets down her hair and wipes His feet. And the crowd was scandalized. Because the rabbis taught that a woman going about with uncovered hair represented unacceptable conduct, and if a married woman lets down her hair in public it was grounds for divorce. Unbound hair for a woman was a way of showing love, of showing openness, of showing intimacy – this is something you should only be doing in private at home with your closest family members.

So what was she doing by letting her hair down? You need to know, that it is possible that you think that you have gone all the way with Jesus. It is possible to say, 'Lord I give you anything you ask for, I give you all my things'. And it is possible to go further and say, 'Not only that, I give up control. I will obey You no matter what You say, or what You send into my life – I will obey You unconditionally'. But there is something you can still hold back. You don't have to like it. You can grit your teeth and bear it. But you hate it. Like the little girl who was sentenced by her mother to go sit in the corner for misbehaving. And as she was sitting in the corner, face to the wall, she was heard to mutter: 'I might be sitting down on the outside, but inside I'm standing up!'

You can give up control and you can be obedient and not question it and you can submit and say, 'This is what I owe' – you can do all of that and still hold on to your heart, still not make Him the one that delights your soul. What Mary is saying is this: 'Not only am I giving You everything I have and complete control of my life – I am giving You everything I am. I'm not just giving You all my stuff and complete reign over my life – **I'm going to delight in giving you everything – I'm going to enjoy giving you control.**' She is saying what the psalmist said in Psalm 63: *Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips will praise You. So I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips. When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches, for You have been my help, and in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me.* Psalm 63:3-8 To be broken and poured out – all the way – is to know Jesus not only as your Helper, Sustainer, Guide and Protector – but as your delight.

It is what Jesus says over and over in the gospels – I am worth everything. In Matthew 13 there are two short parables. The first is: *The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.* Matthew 13:4 And the other is like it: *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.* Matthew 13:45-46 The man who finds the treasure in the field and **with joy**, sells everything he has to buy the field, knows that even if the field costs him everything he has, all he owns, whatever his networth might be – that is nothing compared to the value of what is in the field. That's why he does it with joy! It is worth the stripping away of all that he has – in fact there is delight in doing it – because the treasure is so valuable.

You can almost hear him say, 'I can buy this field with the treasure in it – and all I have to do is pay for it with everything I own? What a deal!' And that really isn't so far-fetched – it only seems that way because we don't understand the value of the treasure. But what if there were a field on which you found oil, and all you had to do to buy the field was pay for with everything you own? We wouldn't hesitate. We'd be battering down the door of the realty agent. We wouldn't let anything stop us – because we know that the value of what is in the field is worth more than ten, fifteen, a hundred times as much as we presently own. And we'd do it with unmitigated joy!

The Puritans used to talk about the second parable a lot and what they'd say all the time is: Have you bought the pearl? Have you bought the pearl? **In other words, have you seen the incredible worth of Christ and sold everything for Him?** What about you? Would it be possible for someone following you around to see that you had bought the pearl? Do you act like you have the most precious possession in the world? There is a great scene in the movie, 'The Prince and the Pauper' where a street boy and the prince of England trade places for a day because they look like identical twins, you can't tell them apart except for the clothes. And the poor street boy gets into the palace and he doesn't know what to do or how to act or anything. But he's hungry and sees some nuts in a bowl but nothing to crack them with and he looks around and finally comes up with this heavy, gold, obviously incredibly valuable thing that he uses as a nutcracker. And the chamberlain comes in and almost faints because he is cracking these nuts with the royal seal of England that is only used to stamp royal edicts. And whoever has the seal – has the throne. But this boy has no idea.

Have you bought the pearl? Do you know the value of the treasure in the field? Where we are with this really comes out in our thinking. If you find in yourself a tendency to see the Christian life in terms of what I can do and what I can't do – if you hear yourself saying, probably not out loud but in your head – 'As a Christian I know I can't do that – as a Christian I know I really should be doing this – as a Christian I should be more of this and less of that – if that is what goes on in your thinking – **you don't know what you have**. You don't realize that all the stuff that seems like an incredible price to pay is **nothing** – less than nothing – in view of the surpassing value of what is in the field. And that is why Mary could lavish on Jesus not only all she had but all she was. All her stuff and all her soul – and it was not a painful duty, but a joyful privilege.

Quite obviously Judas didn't know Him this way. *But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?" Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.* John 12:4-6 I've often wondered why Jesus put the rat in charge of the cheese. If John knew this, don't you think Jesus knew it? But John doesn't give us these details to focus on Judas. He is simply contrasting Mary's broken and poured out stance with Judas' hypocritical and self-absorbed condition. Judas didn't give two hoots for the poor and viewed this display as not only shameful but incredibly wasteful.

But all Jesus says is 'Leave her alone.' *Therefore Jesus said, "Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. "For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me."* John 12:7-8 First of all Jesus is not dissing the poor – He wasn't saying 'Who cares about the poor?' In fact He is saying just the opposite. This does not assume the poor are unimportant – it assumes that the poor are incredibly important. So much so that for Him to take precedence over the poor displays His infinite value over all things. No one said more about the importance of the poor than Jesus and for Him to edge them out here does not diminish their importance but rather highlights His. That is why what He is saying is so strong.

And what He says is that Mary knew that He was on the road to Calvary and death. *"Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. "* Some commentators say that Mary somehow knew of His substitutionary atonement. She had this insight and knew that He was going to die for the world. That is not likely. Others say that she couldn't possibly know that He was going to die. But where do we find Mary, every time we meet her in the gospels? She is at Jesus' feet. Martha is busy serving but Mary is at His feet. She's listening, she's learning, and to some degree she is understanding where He is headed. Something of His mission and purpose has gotten through to her. And at the end of chapter eleven, we see Mary's friends who had gathered – some of them believed when they saw Lazarus raised from the dead, but some of them went and told the Pharisees. And no doubt, some of her believing friends told Mary what her other friends had done. And now the authorities were out for blood. Mary must have realized that the only way Jesus could have interrupted Lazarus' funeral was to cause His own – the only way He could make all things new was that He would be buried.

What Mary was doing was singing a song. When she broke the alabaster box she was singing:

*Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
Every power as You choose.*

When she anointed His head and His feet with the perfume she was singing:

*Take my will and make it Thine,
It shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is Thine own,
It shall be Thy royal throne.*

And when she wiped His feet with her hair she was singing:

*Take my love, my Lord I pour,
At Your feet its treasure store.
Take myself and I will be,
Ever, only, all for Thee.*

Mark concludes the story with these words: *"Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."* Mark 14:1-9 He says this because this is the only genuine response to the gospel. The only genuine response to the magnitude of the gift of salvation is what that Indian man sang to his executioners:

***I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back no turning back***

***Tho' none go with me still I will follow
Tho' none go with me still I will follow
Tho' none go with me still I will follow
No turning back no turning back***

***The world behind me the cross before me
The world behind me the cross before me
The world behind me the cross before me
No turning back no turning back***

Our good and gracious Father,

Grant that we would see what Mary saw as she poured out her all on You. May our souls long and passionately breathe after You and our joy come from delighting in and glorifying You. Let the desire of our hearts be to place our all in Your hands, to be entirely and wholly for You. May our commitment not be conditioned by the cost of following You, and may we find that there is nothing You cannot ask of us. Help us Lord, to live entirely for You, to make You our joy and delight and our everlasting treasure, and may that joy in turn be overflowing in the gospel to all people we pray in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.