

A BROKEN VESSEL FOR JESUS
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PARKWAY GARDENS UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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11:00 WORSHIP SERVICE

Here we are today on the first Sunday in Lent. And, we are “Celebrating the Gifts of Women Sunday” here at Parkway Gardens United PC. It’s an honor to be with you. I preached my first sermon right here in this pulpit on the first Sunday in Lent on March 9, 2003 during the “Celebration of the Gifts of Women Sunday.” Here I am again. Allow me to thank the Session and Pastor Henderson for allowing PW to “Celebrate the Gifts of Women” today. I wish more churches would do this. It’s how I am able to stand before you today.

I also want to bring you greetings from the Presbytery of the Mid-South. Even the midst of more churches leaving us, some very positive things are happening. Just this past week, I was involved in planning a Care giving Event, which will include End of Life Issues to be presented to our Presbytery by Rosemary Banta. We will cluster churches in Memphis, Caruthersville, MO and Jackson, TN. We are hoping these presentations will all take place in June.

Also, we are trying to pull together some people to go to the Big Tent Conference June 30- July 2 in Indianapolis, IN and we are working on a mission project called **Jobs for Life**. You will be hearing more about each of these real soon.

Mark 14: 1-11

Let us pray. Gracious God, let the words of my mouth and the mediation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, Oh Lord our God, and our Redeemer. Amen

It was an ancient custom to anoint the feet of a Rabbi. Jesus was likely anointed many times, but only two times stand out. One was recorded in Luke, the other in Mark, which we read today.

This lesson is about plotting, betrayal and a broken vessel by a broken woman. It just may be our own story.

It was now two days before the Passover. The Chief Priest and Scribes were seeking how to arrest Jesus and kill him, but they said, “Not during the feast, lest there would be an uproar from the people.” And while He was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, He was sitting at the dinner table, a woman came in with an alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard, a very costly perfume, and she broke the jar and poured it over His head. The disciples were there at the table, as well as others, and some of them thought this was a waste, “Why was the ointment wasted like that?”

They scolded her. But Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her?” “She has done a beautiful thing to me. But the disciples were thinking just how practical was this act and the cost was out of sight.

Like in today’s world, the practicality and cost of worshipping Jesus were called into question in those days at that dinner party there in the town of Bethany. Now, Bethany was and is still a small place. When Nancy and Anne and I were in the Holy Land in 2007, we were within one mile of Bethany. We stood in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives and the road on the East side of the Mount of Olives went to Bethany. We had lunch in Jerusalem at a roof top restaurant and we could see the road that led to Bethany and just over the hill top there was this small place, not very glitzy. A person went through Bethany, not to Bethany. You know the kind of place. But once a year Bethany had visitors. Perhaps up to 300,000

people came to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem and they had to pass through Bethany.

For the second time in Jesus' life, a woman came to him, broke a jar of costly ointment, and anointed, this time, the head of Jesus. The first time another woman anointed the feet of Jesus.

Mark doesn't tell us the name of the woman but John does. This is Mary, whom we know, as the sister of Martha and Lazarus, friends of Jesus. PW here will remember the *Horizons* Bible study we did some years back on Mary and Martha. I believe it was in year 2000.

With its strong fragrance lingering in the air, and the head of Jesus still damp, the disciples jumped Mary's case, big time. They questioned the practicality and the cost of the act.

How Practical Is It and How Much Does It Cost?

In today's business world, the dominant question is, "How practical is it and what does it cost?"

I wonder how many people estimate their commitment to Jesus in this way. How practical is it for me to give my life to Jesus Christ and what does it cost?

If you are a student, you might say, "Well, I have too many plans of my own right now." So, not now. A single Mom might say, "I work all day, have children at home and I help take care of my ailing parents." Don't have the time. The working couple might say, "We don't have time for Church with

the children's sports activities, and dance classes, and piano lessons, groceries to buy and business dinners to prepare, no, we simply don't have time. The businessman might say, "I would love to spend more time with church stuff, but I have a business to run! It is not practical to follow Jesus right now in my life." The retiree might say, "I can't travel and visit the grandchildren, if I'm so involved in church and charity work. Maybe when I slow down. **It is just not practical right now. The cost is just too high.**"

The question for us this morning is: How practical is it to break open the expensive vessel of my life and pour it all out for Jesus Christ.

What are broken vessels? They are people who reflect the heart of Mary who sought to give her life to Jesus in this form of worship. They are honored by Jesus. The message of Mary's 'broken vessel story' will be told over and over again throughout the world, as an honor to her, for what she did at the dinner party at Simon's house in Bethany, even told here at Parkway Garden United Presbyterian Church this morning.

God said in I Samuel, "Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained." Do you want honor from God, his blessing of you? Then you, too, must become a broken vessel. I believe that there not only was a jar broken that day at that table, but also a woman.

Remember the story of Mary when Jesus raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, Mary was distant, far away from Jesus. She had hoped Jesus would come in time to save her very ill brother, but He did not. When He finally

came, in His own time, she was disappointed and upset with Him. But Christ's time was better than her time. Her brother was raised from the dead. But, she is NOW broken of that former self – that distant attitude was gone and she came to Jesus at Simon's house, her neighbor there in Bethany.

Jesus Wants Vessels Who are Broken of Self

Some of us are not broken of self because we are filled with disappointment with God. How many have given up on God? Maybe He did not come in time when you wanted family healing. Maybe He did not come in time to save your job, or to save your marriage, or in time to save your loved one. Maybe He did not come in time to save your teenager from drugs, or your spouse from alcoholism.

But, Jesus knows our anguish. He is still in control of all things in this earth even when they are broken and even when our dreams are dead on arrival. Jesus is not finished. He gives us new life, in His own time.

You know, the thing that gets in our way of total servant hood is total selfishness!!

In Mark 8:35 we read, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it."

What does this mean? How do we put this into practice? It simply means that you and your will must be removed from the driver's seat of your life. You must allow God to be the Driver. That must happen throughout a Christian's life in order to find contentment.

Who will now come like Mary did --drawn out of your isolation, out of your anger, out of your fear – to fall before Christ, who will bring true reunion with your family, who will bring joy to your soul, who will bring meaning to your life, who will bring hope to your future? There must be shattered pieces of self in order for Christ to live in you.

God Wants Vessels Who Are Broken of Possessions

Mary not only came to Jesus but also brought a material token of new life. She broke what was surely her most valuable possession – an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume made of pure nard....a rare and costly herb from a **plant** grown in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains of Nepal, India, a very long distance in those days from Bethany...through Persia, now Iran, across present day Iraq, Jordan and into Israel. Mark tells us it was worth a year's wages for a day laborer, so we might imagine it would be worth around \$40,000.00 or so today. The distance would account for much of the cost. It was in a thin-necked alabaster jar, sturdy and protective, you know, the kind that you see in museums, which was likely handed down from mother to daughter and she broke it –she broke it - to anoint the head of Jesus.

The aroma filled the room with its powerful fragrance, but the disciples, specifically Judas, scolded Jesus for allowing it. It could have been sold and given to the poor, he said.

This is the same Judas Iscariot that plans to betray Jesus in just a few hours, just up the road about one mile in the Garden of Gethsemane and deliver

him to His enemies. While Mary worshiped Jesus with the ointment, there were religious leaders plotting to kill him. She came to Jesus to show her faith, and she anointed him with a tangible expression of her love, her most valuable possession.

What will you do? I wonder, today, how many of you are close to the kingdom of God, but the thing holding you back is that bottle of nard in your life? Nard comes in many bottles. It may be bottled in security....meaning money, property, popularity, friends, family connections and success. It may be kept in a jar called selfishness.

It must go. There must be nothing standing between you and Jesus today, for there will be nothing that can stand between you and God tomorrow.

God Wants Vessels Who Are Broken of Pride

Pride is like a boulder. You know the kind of boulder that falls from the mountains in East Tennessee on I-40 and blocks the road. You can't pass by. Pride blocks our way, just like those boulders, and keeps us from giving our lives to Jesus. Pride keeps us from receiving God's blessing. Pride keeps us from being used by God.

Mary is an example of total commitment. Not only did she break open her wealth and pour it on Jesus, she did so as an act of worship, and her worship became extravagant, very extravagant. It was not held in; it was complete. It would not have been proper, then or now, for a woman to come before a Rabbi to do this. But when your heart is so moved, when your life is so changed, you just can't help it....you just want to worship God.

Pardon me, but what is that fragrance you are wearing this morning? When we are broken for Jesus, emptied of pride, willing to pour out our lives for the love of Christ, we have the fragrance of love. That fragrance swallows up the stench of sin, of sorrow, of sadness, even the stench of pride.

I'm reminded of a quote from Rev. Rick Kirchoff, former Pastor of Germantown Methodist Church. He said, "A woman with 8 children came back to her house and it was too quiet. So she quietly went up the front steps and looked through the screen door and saw five of her eight children hovered around something on the floor. She quietly went over to them and she saw 5 skunks on the floor. She hollered, "Children run," so they each picked up a skunk and ran.

We do that too...we carry stinky skunks around with us. We need to let go of the skunks in our lives and put on the fragrance of love and contentment that comes only through Jesus Christ.

I have discovered that God uses brokenness to get our attention. For some it might be a shattered marriage, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job in these troubled times, or ruined finances, or a broken engagement, or a spouse gone off to Afghanistan. For others the discovery of cancer. God can use any of these episodes to tame our souls. The source of the situation is not nearly as important as how we respond to it.

For me personally, I have encountered plenty of brokenness in my life. My heart was broken when within a few years I lost both by parents, then my

husband, then my only sibling, my sister Shirley, whom I adored. She accidentally fell down the stairs in the house she had lived in 40 years and it took her life at 61 years old. I was employed at St. Joseph Hospital, a 110 year old institution that had continually given compassionate care and life to patients and brought babies into this world, and then it was sold by the Sisters of St. Francis in Mishawaka, IN, who owned it, torn now and gone before we hardly knew what was happening. I remember standing in the chapel just one week before we all knew that a wrecking ball would hit that holy place with as many employees, doctors, nurses and administrators as could fit into it and a doctor leading us in singing, “You are standing on Holy Ground.” Not a dry eye in the room. You talk about a broken heart!

Then as you all know, I walked down this aisle right here with Betty Broadnax on September 25, 2005, carrying a flame that brought about the closing of Whitehaven Presbyterian Church that had been a congregation for 161 years, thirty-seven of which I had been a member. Then, last year in May, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and went through two major surgeries.

I definitely fell before the feet of Jesus and, in my brokenness, poured out my life from that broken vessel to Him. What I’m doing today is an example of that love.

Most of you know Lucy Cummings in the Presbytery Office. Recently, Lucy and I were talking and I told her that this year I will serve as Moderator of the Presbytery of the Mid-South and next year Chair of Council and that would make 10 consecutive years that I have served either

PW, the Presbytery of the Mid-South or the Synod of Living Waters of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and after that I was stepping back, taking a break, going to Florida and walk on the beach and when an opportunity came my way, I would just say “no.” And, she said, “No you won’t.” I responded, “What do you mean I won’t?” She said, “People like you don’t quit, they just keep on going and keep on doing!”

It was only when I was preparing this sermon that I realized what Lucy really meant. Once you’ve broken that vessel and poured your life out for Christ, there is no going back....just like Mary, you want to worship God and be in His service.

After all, Jesus Christ was a broken vessel, abandoned by God and man on a cruel cross, and on Good Friday afternoon his blood was poured out for us. But not long before that happened, the disciples who had given so much to follow Jesus were told by Jesus that one of you will betray me. Immediately the room was filled with the sound of excited voices all talking at once: “Is it I, Lord, is it I? Shouldn’t we ask that question this morning? “Is it I, Lord, is it I?” Especially, we should ask that question this morning, the first Sunday in Lent.

Somewhere this morning, Christians are lukewarm in their faith. Their lives and witness are “neither hot nor cold.” They like Jesus but have decided that He is a bit too extreme in certain respects, that ideas like loving one’s enemies and living for God are not terribly useful in the today’s ‘real world.’ They are committed to not taking this religion business too seriously, to not

letting it disrupt the values and convictions they presently live by. “One of you will betray Me.” Is it I, Lord, is it I?

Somewhere this morning, Christians are leading such frantic, fragmented lives that they are losing the sense of purpose and peace, the unifying focus which faith alone can bring. They have overscheduled and overcommitted themselves to so many things they wonder where they have been, where they are going and what they are living for. Faith in Christ and involvement with His church is just one item on a long list of priorities that they just don't seem to get around to. “One of you will betray Me.” Is it I, Lord, is it I?

Somewhere this morning, Christians are facing loss and grief and the tragedies of life without the faith which Jesus Christ can give. They are rejecting His company and trying to face their trials alone. They are rejecting His suffering and disbelieving His sacrifice because they can't imagine that He has died and risen again for them. Somewhere this morning, Christians are turning from Christ at the very moment they should be seeking Him out. “One of you will betray Me.” Is it I, Lord, is it I?

Somewhere this morning, Christians are at odds with their neighbors and even their loved ones. They are not forgiving those who have wronged them, nor are they blessing those who hurt them. They are feeding old grudges and feasting on old resentments. Somewhere this morning, Christians are arguing and gossiping and abusing one another, when they should be breaking that vessel like Mary did and pouring their lives out for Jesus. “One of you will betray Me.” Is it I, Lord, is it I?

And somewhere this morning, there are Christians who are using the name of Christ to bless every manner of injustice and wickedness in the world. They are rich while others starve and they call it God's will. They urge us to hate our enemies and despise the things that make for peace. Their consciences are hardly stirred as the innocent are tortured and the guiltless are imprisoned. Somewhere this morning, there are Christians who do violence to the cause of Christ by the evil they do in His name. "One of you will betray me." Is it I, Lord, is it I?

Mind you, I'm not worried about Jesus this morning. He has died on that lonely cross, poured his blood out for you and me. He has risen from that tomb and His will endures forever and His love for us will never die.

No, I'm more worried about you and me this morning. I'm more concerned that we live daily with the question that the disciples asked so long ago when Jesus said, "One of you will betray me." And they asked, "Is it I, Lord, is it I? We have come to a time of soul searching this morning.

We have come to the time when each of us need to go ahead, break open the vessel, and pour our lives out for Jesus Christ. And, do it in an extravagant way!!! And, do it in an extravagant way!!!

Amen.

Sing, **"Only Believe.**