

Ash Wednesday
26 + February + 2020

Eyes of Jesus — Misjudging Eyes
Mark 14:1-9

Old Testament

Jonah 3:1–10

¹Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,
²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

⁶The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Epistle

1 Peter 1:2–11

²May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

³His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and

godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Gospel

Mark 14:1–9

¹It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, ²for they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.”

³And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. ⁴There were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment wasted like that? ⁵For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” And they scolded her. ⁶But Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for

them. But you will not always have me. ⁸She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. ⁹And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

If you get ashes in your eyes, you can't see clearly. Our inborn sinfulness blows ashes in our spiritual eyesight. We look at what is good and change its purpose to what is bad, or we look upon what is beautiful, but we misjudge its true value and purpose.

When Jesus says in the Gospel, **“When you give to the needy”** (Matthew 6:2), He assumes that Christians will do this, and since He would never want us to do something bad, then giving to the needy must be a good thing to do. Jesus also says in the Passion Reading, **“You always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them”** (Mark 14:7). But sinners misjudge the purpose of such good deeds.

Jesus criticized the hypocrites **“in the synagogues and in the streets”** for making a show of giving to the needy in order that they **“be praised by others”** (Matthew 6:2). Likewise, they prayed long-winded prayers and made a show of fasting in order to **“be seen by others”** (Matthew 6:5, 16). In being praised and seen by others, those full of themselves received the rewards they were seeking: to be held in high esteem by other people. This is an entirely self-serving and godless approach to good works, because it pays no thought to our Father in heaven or for the true need of our neighbor.

On the other hand, those who come to the Father through faith in His Son view good works as opportunities to serve the neighbor and please God (2 Corinthians 5:9). In fact, they aren't even seeking a reward. Jesus never says that rewards are why Christians—why you do what you are

to do for others. Jesus promises that the Father will reward the almsgiving, prayer, and fasting of His children, but reward is not to be our motivation.

But our old Adam misjudges this point. Sin's **deep delusion** is that good works must be done in order to be rewarded by God, to earn eternal life. That is the worst misjudgment you can make. Thanks be to God that on this Ash Wednesday, God's Holy Word, along with the liturgy and hymns, all of these make painfully clear your utter wretchedness and desperate need for the forgiveness of your sins. What you need most isn't to give to those in need or do any other good work. You need the Lamb of God to take away your sins. And St. Mark takes you to Jesus where you learn that **"It was now two days before the Passover. . . . And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest Him by stealth and kill Him"** (Mark 14:1).

In just a couple of days two actions would take place: the Passover meal where the unblemished lamb would be slaughtered and eaten, and the crucifixion, where the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, would be sacrificed on the cross. Jesus had repeatedly told His disciples that His death was drawing near. But unlike Jesus, the guests at Simon's dinner party didn't have their mind on the cross when an uninvited woman barged in, broke open a jar of perfume, and dumped it on Jesus' head. I think artwork, Passion plays, and popular imagination tend to depict the woman's act as quiet and carried out discretely, but the text suggests a suddenness and clumsiness to what she did. Alabaster flasks weren't cheap and could be reused many times, but St. Mark tells us she broke the expensive container—she smashes it open—and renders it useless for the future. It is quite legitimate to see this woman, not slowly and gently pouring the ointment on Jesus' head, but drenching Him, leaving Him blinking to squeeze out the drops falling into His eyes.

And the value of the ointment? If those who were doing a hasty cost analysis on the ointment, that it really could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, then that would roughly equal a year's wages

for a day laborer. At the modest wage of \$12.50 an hour that you can get at most fast food restaurants, three hundred days' wages convert to \$30,000. Before the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples estimated that two hundred denarii worth of bread would fill the crowd's bellies (Mark 6:37). Just imagine how many people you could feed with three hundred denarii! That's what the guests at Simon's dinner were saying among themselves, outraged at the woman's wastefulness, outraged that so many would go hungry because of her impulsiveness. "What's wrong with you, woman? Are you out of your mind? You should have sold that perfume and given the money to the poor!" But their sight was seriously clouded by selfishness and sin. They had misjudging eyes.

PART I

Jesus, however, always sees clearly. He comes to the woman's defense and tells her critics to knock it off and to back off. Jesus recognizes this dear, insightful woman and her clumsy, unceremonious, impulsive action as a beautiful work, as preparation for the most beautiful, noble, good deed in human history: the suffering, death, and burial of her Savior, their Savior, and your Savior.

Yes, it is good—it is very good—to give to the needy, to do good to the poor. But when the Son of God in the flesh is sitting at your dinner table preparing to suffer and die for the sin of the world in a couple of days and then be hastily put in a borrowed grave without proper anointing at His burial, then thousands of dollars of ointment is no waste. What the woman gives is rightly devoted to His service. **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven”** (Ecclesiastes 3:1). What the dinner guests could not see was the rare moment unfolding before their own eyes: For God's *Anointed One*—that's what *Christ* and *Messiah* mean—would soon give His body and shed His blood, give His life as a ransom for the masses, to be the once-for-all Passover Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This moment was not business as usual. I'm sure that God the Father, who provides the daily bread for which we pray, He generously

found other ways through the hands and hearts and monetary gifts of others to feed the poor of the village of Bethany and the city of Jerusalem on that day, even as the heavenly Father was about to pour out the priceless blood of His beloved Son as a saving, healing ointment for sinners. And the Son of God went to the cross willingly, to offer His life for the lives of all sinners of all time and in all places—and for your life, too!

What an aroma that perfume must have made in the house, perhaps in a way that a dozen Easter lilies in a small room fill the air with the smell of resurrection. In just a few days, Jesus would be hanging on a cross. As the sweat and blood poured down Jesus' face, could He still smell the perfume that had prepared Him for burial? It would have been fitting for Him to do so, for, as St. Paul writes, **“Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”** (Ephesians 5:2). The smell of Christ's holy person and His saving work turned away the wrath of God against sinners once and for all.

PART II

What Jesus has done for you is covered you with the sweet smell of His salvation, anointing you with His blood, washing you with His baptismal water. The offensive stink of sin and the lying, betraying cheap perfume of Satan and the stench of eternal damnation and death, that is all gone. As St. Paul proclaims, you are **“the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing”** (2 Corinthians 2:15). The words of God's Good News and the good works you do to and for your neighbor, whether you are aware of such things or not, these carry out the love of God for both saving souls and caring for earthly needs.

That's what the unnamed woman was doing, and her motivation has to have been faith in Jesus and love for Him, since Jesus solemnly states, **“Truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her”** (Mark 14:9).

She was an important part of the Gospel story being fulfilled, and the Gospel is always about forgiveness of sins being received by faith. Why doesn't St. Mark give us this woman's name? Because at that moment it wasn't about her. The point was—and is—Jesus and His saving work. When Jesus says, **“But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,** (Matthew 6:3), He is letting you also know that it isn't important that others know what your left hand or right hand are giving and doing. The woman's hidden identity teaches us about how to approach doing good works. **“She has done what she could,”** Jesus says. That is, she simply lived out her vocation, her daily God-given life, and on that day, she was called to do the beautiful work of anointing Jesus beforehand for His burial. She did not do it to be praised or seen by others, nor was she seeking a reward, but she had eyes only for Jesus. And now, even though as a sinner she was not worthy of anything from the Father, she has gone on to receive her eternal reward, all for the sake of the Jesus whom she anointed.

You also are called to do what you can in your various vocations, in whatever situation the Lord puts you each day. You are set free from the enslaving misjudgment that you should do good works either to be praised by others or to be justified and earn your salvation from God. In Jesus, you receive both earthly and eternal rewards that you could never earn, by grace alone. That takes all the pressure off and places you under His easy yoke and light burden. So on this Ash Wednesday, and on every day, repent and believe the Gospel. And then rejoice that you have been judged forgiven and are seen perfectly in the eyes of the One who has His eyes on you! Yes, Jesus has His eyes completely, perfectly, and always on you. Amen.

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