



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 3, 2018

“Breaking the Alabaster Jar”

(Luke 7:36-50)

Rev. David K. Groth

Sermon text is the Gospel lesson (Luke 7:36-50), and a related text from Mark 14. “A woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured out the perfume. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, ‘Why this terrible waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.’ And they rebuked her harshly. ‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me’” (vv. 3-7).

Collect: Eternal God, Your Son Jesus Christ is our true Sabbath rest. Help us to keep each day holy by receiving His word of comfort that we may find our rest in Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Have you ever been a fool for love? Have you ever been so in love that you threw caution to the wind and emptied your heart and maybe your wallet? Can you recall a love letter you wrote that would make you blush today because of how excessive it was! Or a time when you spent way too much money – bought roses instead of carnations, champagne instead of carbonated wine? I think it was Garrison Keillor who tells a wonderful story about how, when he was in first grade, a new student moved to town, a cute, little blond haired girl with whom he immediately fell in love. He went home and cracked open his piggy bank, and with the contents bought her 25 packages of Juicy Fruit chewing gum. Have you ever been a fool for love? It's what this woman did in the Gospel lesson.

It was a formal occasion to which Jesus was invited. The custom of the day was to have low couches or cushions arranged in the shape of a U. The food was in large bowls in the middle. The guests reclined, leaning on one elbow, feet away from the table. The houses were built in such a way that passersby could look in and see who was at the table. If it looked interesting, it was not unusual for people to crowd in and watch and listen.

Sandals were always left at the door. While the guests reclined and visited, servants usually poured water over their feet, drying them with a towel. The ritual was as normal and predictable as shaking hands with your guests, taking their coats and offering something to drink.

But in this case, there has been a significant and serious deviation in custom. The host is a Pharisee named Simon. He has not welcomed Jesus with the customary kiss. No water was poured on Jesus' feet which was the minimal gesture of hospitality. It was a visual snub – not unlike inviting a guest to dinner and ignoring him. People would have noticed.

Surely Simon was familiar with the customs of the day. Perhaps he hadn't made up his mind about this man Jesus, and wanted to protect his reputation by being cautious, even cold with him. Perhaps he had made up his mind and was intentionally snubbing Jesus, wanting to put the young Rabbi in his place. Whatever his motives, Simon's welcome was cold and loveless.

So here they are, reclining at table. Things are already a bit tense. "And behold" the text says, "a woman of the city, who was a sinner" came in. Sometimes we forget that "Behold" expresses astonishment. That's clearly how those in the house feel when this woman comes barging in. She may not be a prostitute, but there are indications. "Sinner" is often a sort of code word for that line of work. And behold here she is in the Pharisee's house! Gushing with raw emotion, she cries all over the feet of Jesus, letting her hair down to wipe off the tears. By the way, letting the hair down at the time was an act of intimate affection. This was scandalous behavior. If she was married, this would have been grounds for divorce. In any case, this woman dries his feet with her hair. She's making quite a spectacle of herself.

The dinner guests and onlookers are stunned – uncomfortable and embarrassed for their host, Simon. No one knows what to say. And for his part Jesus hasn't made the slightest move to pull away from her. He just sits there and lets her do all this. In fact, he seems to be enjoying it! His consent encourages her. She starts kissing his feet. People cannot believe their eyes. Then she pulls out a little alabaster flask. It's called "alabaster" after the town in Egypt where it was chiefly found. This bottle contains in the Greek what is called muron, a very costly perfume. If you had it, you used it very sparingly, maybe stretching its use out over a lifetime. The flasks usually had a thin neck with a beeswax cap in which a little slit was cut to decant the perfume one drop at a time. But Mark tells us she breaks the neck of the bottle, and pours it out on Jesus' feet. In his

account John noticed it filled the whole house with the strong fragrance.

Simon sniffs his displeasure. “If this fellow were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him.” Others also didn’t like it, but for different reasons. In his account, Mark noticed some were grumbling about how it was all a terrible waste. They had done some quick math in their heads and had calculated that it was worth about a year’s wages for a laborer. That perfume could have been sold for cold, hard cash and the money given to the poor! Mark 14:5, “And they scolded her harshly.”

Now, from here we could go in multiple directions. The last time I preached on this text I focused on the fact that this woman knew she had been forgiven much, therefore her love for Jesus was great, as was her gratitude. While others dismiss their own sin as small and inconsequential, and so the Savior Jesus is also small and inconsequential to them. But I want to focus a little more on the quick math people had done, and how they scolded the woman. “That perfume could have been sold for cold, hard cash and the money given to the poor.”

We’re embarking on the first major renovation of this sanctuary in its history. Whenever a church does something costly like this, it’s bound to raise some eyebrows. Do we really need to do this? Why isn’t this money used for student aide in our school, or for mission work, or for the hungry? Why don’t we first eliminate our debt? Why don’t we redo the fellowship hall instead, which indeed also needs some attention? How can we ask for a quarter of a million dollars for stained glass windows and new lighting when some people don’t have lights at all, because their power has been shut off?

My answer: Because we have a rare and remarkable opportunity to pour a little perfume on the Lord’s feet. Is it absolutely necessary? No. Our sanctuary is still functioning. But we’ve been given a chance to make it so much better. As you know, we’ve been given twelve beautiful and large

stained glass windows from Bethesda. Before Bethesda's chapel was torn down, Bethesda contracted with a company I think from Ohio to carefully extract the windows, disassemble them, crate them, and deliver them right to our doors. How much did Bethesda charge us for all this? 0! How much would it have cost us otherwise to have these windows designed, built and delivered? It would simply have been prohibitive. So we have this opportunity, but now we have to find a way to pay for them to be installed here. We've already approved this project in a voters' meeting, but there's another vote that we need to make, and it's much harder. We make this vote with our money, and if we want, we can vote "no," and if enough of us do, then I think we would have to say to Bethesda, "Thanks, but no thanks. Here are your windows. Please find another church that can use them." Wouldn't that be a terrible shame?

But these beautiful changes to our sanctuary will require generous giving from each of us, myself included. In this text, according to Jesus, there is value in beauty, in extravagance, in love which goes beyond words or even reason to express itself. Where others would dismiss this woman as a wasteful fool, Jesus lifts her up as an example. "Leave her alone" he says. "She has done a beautiful thing to me. You will always have the poor. You will not always have me."

Obviously, Jesus would not want us to do one at the expense of the other. He was not insensitive to the needs of the poor. And we will continue caring for the poor as we have. But if we were to wait till all the poor were fed, until all the countries of the world were supplied with ample numbers of missionaries, until every child had opportunity to a low-cost Christian education, then no church would ever be built, no church ever renovated. Nor would the Savior have been pleased with what this woman did.

Certainly the temple of Solomon would never have been built. There were plenty of poor people in Israel during Solomon's day, and the Lord made it plain he wanted them provided for. Yet he ordered that precious cedars should be

brought from Lebanon and that of gold should be used to his glory in that magnificent structure, and the best of artisans hired to do it right.

In a few years we're coming up on our 50th anniversary. I've been told numerous times this sanctuary was originally intended to be used temporarily until the church decided to build something larger and more traditional. But I think we are coming to terms with the fact that given the religious trends in America, we're here, in this space, for the foreseeable future. And it's a space that is large enough for our needs. That said, isn't it high time we do something special for our sanctuary? Isn't it high time we make it better, brighter, more colorful, more beautiful, more meaningful? We've been given this remarkable opportunity. Let's seize it, and not let it slip away. The fact is, most of what has already been gathered thus far for the sanctuary project would not have been given for any other cause such as paying the electric bills for the poor.

I've worried out loud among staff that my greatest concern is that folks will sort of thoughtlessly write out a check for their customary amount, and feel they've done their share. But that won't cut it for this project. We won't be able to do this on gifts of \$25, \$50 or even \$100. I've also wondered that maybe we should have contracted with a professional fundraising group to help us get this project done. But I hardly have the stomach for all those meetings and print materials and videos and pledges. And I just don't think we should have to, not for this!

I think we can learn from this woman. We tend to calculate and measure our response to Jesus. We err on the side of being balanced and restrained. All things in moderation, we say. All things, which includes our faith, and our gratitude to God and our offerings.

I think we can learn something from this woman. Jesus didn't recoil from her, and he didn't rebuke her for being generous or extravagant. In fact, he told those who were grumbling about her gift to "leave her alone. She's done a good and beautiful thing for me" (Mt. 26:10). Maybe

her response to Jesus was not so excessive after all; it just appears exuberant compared to our customary restraint. Maybe her tears and her weeping were not so embarrassing after all, just grateful compared to our indifference. Maybe her gift of fragrant oil wasn't so wasteful after all, just sacrificial compared to our parsimony. Maybe we can learn from this woman.

She loves Jesus, but she doesn't even use one word to say it. Instead, she does one of those foolish things love does. She breaks the neck off her alabaster flask, and pours it all out on Jesus' feet. And with that she says, "I love you" about as dramatically as it ever has been said.

But there is One who said it even better. In Jesus, God broke the alabaster jar over your feet and poured out its contents. He gave that which was most precious to him, his Son, who poured out his blood for you. That is being a fool for love. That is throwing caution to the wind and emptying the heart. His is a love lacking in balance, in restraint, in moderation. His is a love that is willing to spend it all. By dying on the cross for us, Jesus has said to you "I love you" as eloquently as it can be said. And he says it again and again . . . whenever he baptizes a child or feeds us with his body and blood. God keeps breaking the alabaster jars over our feet, and he'll do it again when he brings us home to recline and feast with him and all the saints.

For now, you and I have our own little flasks of precious, fragrant oils . . . our own resources, maybe in the checking account, maybe in long-term savings. It all ultimately comes from God, but he gives us the responsibility of being stewards of it. If we want, we can keep it all to ourselves, and maybe give him a drop or two. If we want, we can properly anoint the feet of Jesus with precious, fragrant oils.

I believe each of us can learn from this woman. What she did was pleasing to Jesus. The gratitude, the love, the broken alabaster jar . . . Jesus called it good and beautiful. We can learn from this woman. Amen.

