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Ash Wednesday

Mark 14:1-9

Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. ² **“But not during the Feast,” they said, “or the people may riot.”**

³ **While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.**

⁴ **Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume?”** ⁵ **It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.**

⁶ **“Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.** ⁷ **The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.** ⁸ **She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.** ⁹ **I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”** (NIV 84)

Theme: I tell you the truth: Fruits of Faith will be Remembered.

When you die, for what do you want to be remembered? Perhaps as a loving spouse, or a good parent. Maybe you hope people say that you were a nice guy, a good man, a solid friend. Perhaps you want to be remembered as someone who was funny, or cheerful, or always kind toward others. Maybe you want to be remembered for what you did for a living, a business you owned, your favorite hobby or sports team or musician, or how charitable you were toward those in need.

And you may be remembered for those things, for awhile. But what about years down the road? Who is going to remember you 25 years after your death, or 50? A hundred years after you die, all your close relatives and friends will be gone—who will remember you and what you have done then? What about 1000 or 2000 years from now? What does it take to be remembered for that long? You probably have to make some scientific discovery, be a great military leader, make some contribution to the arts, or be a world-renowned and ground

Holy Cross, Standish, MI.

February 18, 2015

breaking philosopher. And even then, most people will never hear of you or your work. Only a small percentage of people are actually remembered long after their deaths.

And then, there’s the woman in our text for today—John tells us that it was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. What did Mary do to be remembered almost 2000 years after she lived? She wasn’t rich and powerful, or a scientist, or a great war leader. She wasn’t an artist or musician that we know of. We remember her today for what she did for Jesus. A few days before Jesus would be arrested she took a jar of perfume to a meal at Simon the Leper’s house. But this wasn’t just any bottle of perfume—it’s not as if she brought her bottle of Ralph Lauren or even Chanel. This was an alabaster jar filled with pure nard. Some of those who were present said it was worth more than a year’s wages. Literally the Greek says “300 denarii.” And we know that a denarius was worth a day’s wages. No matter how you look at it, it was an expensive bottle of perfume—perhaps worth around \$30,000 dollars in today’s money.

Mary took that bottle, broke the top of it and poured it on Jesus’ head. John tells us that she also poured some on his feet and wiped them dry with her hair. She gave that gift to Jesus—anoointing him, preparing him for his burial. And she didn’t think twice about it. This is something she had planned to do. Mary wouldn’t have been carrying such an expensive jar of perfume with her just because. No she took it to Simon’s house with the explicit purpose of using it for Jesus.

Some scoffed at her. **Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.** John tells us that it was Judas who said this—not that he cared about the poor, he was looking to pocket some of the money for himself. But it is a reasonable argument. That perfume was worth a lot of money. Just imagine how many poor could have been clothed or fed with that kind of money!

Those are the same reasonable arguments we hear others making as well. “You need to save your money for your children’s education or for retirement, why are you giving so much to Christ?” “You shouldn’t give the new one to the Church; you should keep it for yourself and give the old one to Church.” “You are so smart and

talented. Why are you giving up a six-figure income in order to join the public ministry?” “I can’t believe they are going to give their entire estate to the WELS; I’m sure their children could have used some of it.”

Those are the same reasonable arguments our sinful nature makes on a daily basis. “I need that money more than the Church does—somehow everything seems to work out for the Church, but not for me. My kids are getting older and they’ll be going to College soon. I’m not getting any younger, and before long I’ll probably retire. I would like a bigger T.V., and maybe a new car; I am also running out of data each month...” Our sinful nature goes on and on. And they are reasonable arguments. But Judas made a similar argument that day.

He and some others may have ridiculed and belittled Mary for the gift she gave Jesus; but Jesus himself. Instead he defended and praised Mary. **She did what she could...I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.** And as we talk about her tonight, these words of Jesus are fulfilled once again.

Have you ever thought about why Mary did what she did? Obviously, she knew who Jesus was—the Promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. It wasn’t long before this that Mary’s brother Lazarus died. And even though he had been dead for four days, Jesus raised from the dead with his mere words. How could Mary ever repay Jesus? She couldn’t. How could she ever thank him rightly? She couldn’t. But to the Lord of death and life, she gave this gift as a small token of her love and thankfulness.

2000 years later we still remember what Jesus did for us. As we hear the passion history during these midweek Lenten services we are reminded not of what Mary gave up, but what Christ gave up. He didn’t just crack open a jar and pour out some perfume. He shed his blood on the cross and died. But not before he was betrayed and arrested, mocked and spit upon, beaten and crowned with thorns, flogged and nailed to a cross. Not before he took our sins upon himself and suffered through the eternal damnation that our sins deserved. Our Lord understood the cost. He knew the price he would have to pay in order to save a world of sinners from eternal damnation. But the high price of his holy precious blood didn’t cause him to shy away from his gift—but he willingly suffered and he gave up his life

so that our sins would be removed and paid for and that we’d be given a perfect and everlasting life in heaven.

That of course, is our motivation. It’s all about love. Since Christ loved us and gave up his life for us, we show love to Christ by giving back to him. When the Holy Spirit leads us to fathom and appreciate the cost of God’s love for us by giving up his son for us, like Mary, we love—without calculating the cost—we love, because he first loved us. With smiles on our faces and joy in our hearts, we break our own alabaster jars, being less logical and more generous, less reasonable and more faithful, less self-centered and more Christ-centered, less concerned about others’ thoughts and more anxious to honor the one who gave up his life for us.

Mary is also remembered for something else. You may remember that once Jesus was at Mary and Martha’s house for a meal. Martha was busy running around getting her house and meal situated for Christ. She complained to Jesus that Mary wasn’t helping out, but was sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to him. Jesus replied, **only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better.** There aren’t many who better understood the place of Christ in our hearts and lives as Mary. Martha was doing something good and noble—preparing a meal for Jesus. But that wasn’t as important listening to God’s Word—nothing is as important as Christ and his gospel, the means by which he gives and strengthens faith. In the same manner, Mary knew that she could have kept that perfume for herself, sold it and bought something for herself or give it to those in need. But she placed Christ first in her heart and life and out of love gave him that wonderful gift!

There is very little chance that you and what you have done will be remembered 2000 or 1000 years from now, even 100 or 50 years from now. Eventually you will be forgotten. There is only one thing that lasts—A perfect life with our Savior forever. So we give to Christ and for the spread of the gospel. For it is through the gospel that the Holy Spirit works faith which receives what Christ has won. Through it we receive the lasting gift of eternal life. Nothing else you choose to do will be remembered nor will it last!

In the end, it doesn’t matter what people think of you or how they remember you. We give and we act for the Lord. The Lord calls a gift given by faith, as big or small as it might be, “a beautiful thing.” So it is he who remembers our fruits of faith.