

The Woman with the Alabaster Jar

Mark 14:3-9

Some were angry and wanted to throw the woman out, but Jesus said “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a good thing for me.”

This angry exchange erupted at a dinner in the home of a man called Simon the Leper, a friend of Jesus and a Pharisee. His leprosy presumably had been healed, perhaps by Jesus. The setting is Jerusalem in the week before Jesus was arrested. Simon and Jesus and his disciples were gathered around the table eating and deep in conversation, when the woman entered unannounced. In Mark’s version of the story, the woman has no name. It is not clear if she was known to Jesus or the others, but she knew better than any of them who Jesus was and that his death was near. There is nothing to suggest that she was notorious – just out of order.

She was a woman on a mission. She approached Jesus with a fine alabaster jar in her hands full of very expensive ointment. She broke open the jar and poured the fragrant oil on Jesus’ head. That act set off the argument. Some condemned the waste of this precious ointment. It was worth a lot of money. They said the money could be used to help the poor. Maybe they wanted to help poor people, or maybe they were just practical and careful about the use of resources. Maybe they were shocked that this woman, whoever she was, had such resources to spend. Maybe they were offended by a woman acting so boldly, so extravagantly, so inappropriately.

Jesus did not have a problem with her. He understood what she was doing. “She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.” He heaped praise on her. “Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

We tell this story because this woman revealed the truth about Jesus and his coming death that others were afraid to see. She touched his heart when she broke open that precious jar and anointed him for his burial. That night she also broke open the mold of who women are, what they are capable of, and what extraordinary gifts they might give.

When we act on our own instincts and follow our own wisdom, we often meet resistance and even ridicule. We’ve never done it that way before. What you are proposing is too expensive. That problem is too big for us to solve. That’s a nice idea, dear, but we have to be practical.

Sometimes it takes an audacious act to break open people’s conventional thinking so they can grasp what God is doing among us. Sometimes we need to be more creative in our giving in supporting what we believe in. Sometimes it is the surprising gift that opens up whole new possibilities. Sometimes extravagance is just the right thing and “over the top” is exactly where we need to be to be faithful. Let the woman with the alabaster jar inspire you to be more brave, more bold, more creative, and more passionate in your giving for the sake of the world.