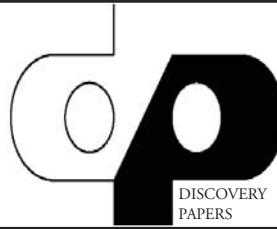


UNCHAIN MY HEART

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 14:1-11
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Al Andrews, a counselor, describes taking piano lessons at age thirteen from a teacher who observed that he played with competence but not with passion. The instructor kept prodding him, but the boy didn't get it. Nevertheless, he kept trying. Finally, something clicked, as his teacher cheered him on:

As long as I live, I'll never forget that moment. A different music came out of the piano. A different passion was released from me. "That's it!" he said. "That's it! You've got it!" Finally I understood him. This time, I knew what he meant. I played on. Exuberantly I continued to play, reveling in his enjoyment—but far more in my own passion and freedom. It was a wonderful day. A day when something deep inside me was released, and the result was music: the rich and passionate music of the soul.

A few weeks later, Andrews quit. "The day I quit has haunted me for years," he said. "As I've watched others play the piano, I've wished it could be me. I have regretted the decision." Why did he quit? Years later, he concluded that he was afraid of losing control:

Even at a young age, I had worked hard at making my life as orderly and predictable as possible. I didn't get into arguments, nor did I engage in anything with too much passion. I wanted to live without too many highs or too many lows, always knowing what to expect. Though I might not accomplish many great successes, I wouldn't experience much failure either.

Playing music that was not on the page might lead me to an unexplored realm, a more dangerous and risky place. I wanted to live my life on the music book page: the notes are there, the instructions are there, the beginning and the end are known. When I moved beyond the predictable and into something more chaotic, there was a greater chance that my incompetence would be exposed. I was more likely to make a fool of myself; there would be a greater possibility of failure. Like most men, I do not enjoy such exposure. It is better to follow the notes, play by the rules, and get through unscathed. Avoid risk. Stay away from chaos ... Whatever I felt that afternoon was too dangerous. The discomfort of it overshadowed the exhilaration.¹

Do you, like Al Andrews, tend to follow the notes, so to speak, settling for the predictable? Do you feel that

something within you wants to be released? Would you like to live with more passion and freedom? In Mark 14:1-11, we meet a woman who makes a bit of a scene with her passion for Jesus. Perhaps we can learn from her.

Opponents plot to seize Jesus

Mark 14:1-2:

Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him; for they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people."²

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread both celebrate the exodus, God's liberation of Israel from Egypt. Eventually, they had come to be essentially one feast. The leadership of Israel, in this case represented by the chief priests and scribes, want to seize Jesus and kill him because they perceive him to be a threat, but his popularity complicates matters. Seizing him publicly during the Passover might precipitate a riot among the throngs of people who have crowded Jerusalem, and that would not sit well with Rome, the ruler of the land. Therefore, the Jewish leaders seek to seize Jesus away from public view and preferably before or after the Passover, which is two days away. However, locating Jesus in Jerusalem or one of the surrounding villages, apart from his public appearances, presented its own set of problems.

The Jewish leaders are hesitant about apprehending Jesus during the Passover, but Jesus has timed his arrival in Jerusalem to coincide with the feast, which recognized not only Israel's liberation from Egypt but also her establishment as the covenant people of God. In the first Passover, God killed the firstborn of Egypt but passed over the Israelites in view of the blood of lambs that they smeared on their doorframes. Jesus is effecting a new Passover, a new exodus, and a new covenant. A new Passover calls for a new Passover lamb. The apostle Paul calls Christ "our Passover" and "the firstborn of all creation" (1 Corinthians 5:7, Colossians 1:15).

Don't worry about those who are opposed to Jesus today. Unbeknownst to them, they, like the chief priests and scribes, are cooperating with God's plans. As always, God subjugates evil and makes it his servant. He achieves

his best purposes in the midst of the worst evil.

In verse 3, Mark's scene shifts from the plotting of the chief priests and scribes to a home in Bethany.

Woman with a vial

Mark 14:3-5:

While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her.

While the Jewish leaders plot his demise, Jesus shares a meal with friends in Bethany, a village two miles from Jerusalem, in the home of someone known as Simon the leper.³ A woman interrupts the meal in order to break a vial of costly perfume and pour it over Jesus' head. Pouring oil over someone's head was done in connection with hospitality, fellowship, and festivity (Psalms 23:5, 133:2; Amos 6:6). This woman, though, goes over the top. She uses not simply oil but perfume—and perfume that was worth about a year's wages. She doesn't simply unstop or untie the vial; she shatters it. She doesn't use just part of the perfume; she empties the vial.

Some at the meal—Mark has no interest in identifying them—take umbrage. Why the waste? they wonder. They reason that the woman could have devoted her resources to the poor if she wanted to contribute to a worthy cause. They publicly rebuke her.

What must this be like for the woman? What's it like to do something extravagant, maybe a little impulsive, something that emerges from your heart, and then to be ridiculed for it? What's it like to have someone rain on your parade? Might she have wondered beforehand about the propriety of spending a year's wages in one act before she decided to go through with it? Might she be wondering now, as others in the room rebuke her, "What a fool I was?"

What does Jesus, the object of her affections, think about her actions? His outlook, as reported in Mark 10:21, is seemingly in sympathy with the onlookers: he instructed a wealthy landowner to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Would he have instructed the woman likewise, in agreement with the onlookers, if she had come to him before she poured the perfume on his head? In any event, how does he respond to her now?

A beautiful thing

Mark 14:6-9:

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

Jesus comes to the defense of the woman. He calls her actions "good"—a word that carries the connotation of "beautiful." Her actions aren't wasteful; they're beautiful.

Her actions are appropriate in view of the occasion. It is also laudatory to do "good" to the poor, but the poor represent an ongoing cause. The opportunity to benefit the poor will always present itself. However, Jesus notes, "you do not always have Me." In an earlier illustration, Jesus said that he, the bridegroom, would be "taken away" (Mark 2:20). Those who criticized the woman don't understand the nature of the occasion. They don't really know who they're dining with and that he is about to be taken from them. It's good to give to the poor, but in view of the occasion, it's better to pour costly perfume on the head of Jesus.

Literally, Jesus says, "What she had, she did." She had a vial of perfume in her hand. She devoted all of what she had in the vial to Jesus. With that, Mark might expect us to remember another woman, a widow, who despite her poverty gave all her money in an offering at the temple. Jesus praised the widow to his disciples and concluded that she "put in more than all the contributors to the treasury" (Mark 12:41-44). The stories of two women frame Jesus' denunciation of the temple in Mark 13. The temple, for all its beauty, will be destroyed. By contrast, the beauty of the devotion of two women stands out.

Jesus attaches symbolic value to the act of pouring perfume on his head. The woman has, he says, anointed his body for burial. Corpses were often wrapped in spices before burial. The fact that Jesus refers to his body, not his head, suggests that perfume covered more than just his head. To anoint him for burial, the entire contents of the vial was necessary. As events would unfold, Jesus' corpse received no anointing, at least in part because his death coincided with the Sabbath. When the Sabbath was over, three women would come to his tomb to anoint him with spices, but his body wasn't there. At that point, anointing for burial would be unnecessary (Mark 16:1-8). It's a good thing, and utterly appropriate, that another woman

had already poured perfume on his head in the home of Simon the leper. She did a good thing, a beautiful thing; she anticipated a beautiful death.

The word “anointed” also suggests another meaning. Kings were anointed (1 Samuel 16:13, 2 Kings 9:6). The meaning of the title “Christ” is “the anointed.” Jesus is the Christ, the ultimate Jewish king, the anointed one.

The woman “broke” the vial and “poured out” the perfume. In the next sequence in his narrative, Mark will report that Jesus “broke” some bread that represented his body and that he gave a cup that represented his blood, which was being “poured out” for many (Mark 14:22-25). On the cross, Jesus’ body would be broken, and his blood would be poured out. The onlookers at Simon’s home literally wanted to know: “Why has this perfume been destroyed?” Why? Because the Jewish leaders were conspiring to “destroy” Jesus (Mark 11:18). Their success, however, would be their failure. A woman with a vial of perfume foreshadows all this, the broken body and poured out blood of the Christ.

Finally, Jesus says that the woman’s extravagance has not simply symbolic value but also enduring value. He predicts that remembrances of her actions will accompany the worldwide preaching of the gospel, the announcement concerning the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. That Mark included her story, and that countless numbers of people throughout the world have heard it, constitutes the fulfillment of Jesus’ prediction. How, then, can such extravagance be considered wasteful?

The woman in Mark 14 echoes David in 1 Samuel 6—David, who danced before the Lord with all his might, but whose wife, Michal, derided him, saying, “How the king of Israel distinguished himself today!”

Identifying with whom?

Immediately, on reading this story, I want to identify with the woman, for she’s presented in a positive light. I also want to join Jesus and tell the stuffed shirts to leave the woman be. If I sit with the story for a while, however, I begin to experience it differently.

Come to think of it, I can’t remember doing anything like what the woman did. I’m hesitant to interject myself into proceedings even if I feel passionately about something. I guard myself against losing control and going over the top. Although I have become less inhibited, still, I keep a fairly tight rein on my emotions. I don’t want to be perceived as a fanatic. Other than the recent purchase of a house, I’ve never spent a year’s wages on anything, much less in devotion to Jesus. I’m unlikely to either shatter something, so that it can never be used again, or to pour out everything for love for Jesus. I’m far too responsible.

A woman I’ve gotten to know a little, regularly says, “I just love the Lord.” She doesn’t say it all the time, but she’s very free about saying it any time, almost as an aside. In private, I tell the Lord I love him, and I’m more expressive when I worship. But to come right out and say, in the presence of others, “I just love the Lord”—I’m not sure I’ve ever done that. Am I just not a very expressive person? Or am I inhibited and too concerned with what others think? I’m not sure.

Maybe I tend to be uncomfortable with those who behave like the woman in Mark 14. I may either question their sincerity or assume they’ve gone too far. I’m a little uncomfortable with those who are *too* exuberant, maybe because I question their sincerity, maybe because I’m envious. I wonder: Have I rained on some parades?

Upon further review, I identify more with the stuffed shirts than the devoted woman. The woman: she unnerves me.

Scholar N.T Wright observes:

It always happens, when people decide to worship Jesus without inhibition—to pour out their valuables, their stories, their dancing, their music, before him just the way they feel like doing—that others, looking on, find the spectacle embarrassing and distasteful. I, who have loved the formal church music of my tradition from boyhood, know only too well the temptation to look down on other, less inhibited styles of music, which sometimes lack a certain polish but often add a certain integrity, a wholeness of spirit. Not everyone is called to pour out expensive ointment over Jesus’ head, but if someone is, the rest should respect it.⁴

Visit the ache

Do you, like me, identify more with the onlookers than the woman? Do you tend to follow the notes? Do you feel that something within you wants to be released? Do you want to live with more passion and freedom? Do you want to be unchained? Perhaps we could learn to be a little more comfortable with emotion. It’s almost as if we want to anesthetize our hearts, eliminate the highs and lows, and live in a state of tranquilized evenness. What else could we do?

Find the ache in your heart. This takes courage, because pain hurts. A football coach in the movie *North Dallas Forty* criticized one of his players who was hesitant to suit up when he was injured, saying of him, “He doesn’t like pain. He says it hurts too much.”⁵ Instinctively, we avoid pain instead of seeking it. But to find the ache in your heart is not to seek new pain (that would be masochistic); it’s to experience present pain or access old pain you’ve

suppressed because, well, because it hurt too much.

Once you locate the ache, visit it. Feel it. Don't minimize it. Let it hurt. Then meet with the Lord in that place. Cry out to him. Listen for his voice. Wait for his touch.

At one point in my life, I had the impression that grief from the past was preventing me from living in the present. Therefore, I went on my first ever personal retreat. I spent two days visiting the aches and meeting with the Lord. At one point, a particularly emblematic ache from my past surfaced and for the first time I said, concerning the event that caused the pain, "That shouldn't have happened." No sooner did those words form in my mind than I sensed the Lord saying, "I know. But I was there." He was there, not protecting me from the pain but present in the pain, shaping me for his good purposes. I wouldn't have known that, however, unless I had visited the ache and met with him.

Grief helps us access our hearts. It helps us *feel*. Grief therefore unlocks our hearts. Many of us go through the motions in life, never feeling much passion because we've never allowed ourselves to feel much pain. I'm convinced that whatever passion I have is with me not least because I've had my heart broken a few times and met with the Lord because of it. Don't waste your pain. Visit it and meet with the Lord. The psalmists often went to deep places of grief in order to meet with the Lord. Especially, see Psalm 22, a masterpiece of lament.

Seize the moment

Who is the woman depicted in Mark 14? In Mark's narrative, she appears out of nowhere. John, however, identifies her as Mary of Bethany.

When her brother Lazarus died, she was inconsolable, not least because Jesus didn't respond to her request, sent through messengers, to come to the aid of her brother when he was ill. Her grief was great indeed. Finally, Jesus came to Bethany, but four days after Lazarus had died. Mary, when she heard that Jesus wanted to see her, raced to him and wept at his feet, pouring out her grief. John describes Jesus' reaction with two words: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Mary visited the ache and met with the Lord. Jesus then came to the tomb of Lazarus and asked that the stone covering the opening of the tomb be removed. Then "he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth'" (John 11:43). John tells the story: "He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go'" (John 11:44). A few days later, Mary took the perfume and anointed Jesus with it.

She visited the ache, met with the Lord, and was sensitive to the occasion (John 11:1-12:8). Perhaps, if we visit

our grief and meet with the Lord, we'll be poised to seize the moment in the manner of Mary.

In Mark 14, Mary wasn't expressive simply to get something out of her. No, she seized a unique opportunity to pour out her love for Jesus. She lamented and celebrated the royal sufferings of Jesus. An occasion for us to respond in kind will present itself as an opportunity to express our love for Jesus and perhaps especially to express our appreciation for his royal sufferings. How will you recognize such an opportunity? Your heart, if you pay attention to it, will let you know. Al Andrews, playing the piano at age thirteen, knew that his heart was speaking to him, and he seized the moment—at least for a moment.

Be poised to do a beautiful thing. It might, like the woman's devotion, last forever. Don't be surprised, however, if others call it wasteful and try to tame your joy. Don't be surprised if your passion isolates you from others who are uncomfortable with it.

In verses 10-11, the scene shifts back to the leaders who are plotting Jesus' demise.

Judas goes to the priests

Mark 14:10-11:

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time.

The chief priests and scribes were seeking to seize Jesus but couldn't figure out how to do it. Shockingly, someone from Jesus' inner circle offers his services. Mark isn't interested in the reason for the decision of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. In fact, none of the New Testament writers speaks explicitly of Judas' motives. Suffice it to say that the cause of Jesus, as it has taken shape, no longer interests Judas, if it ever interested him in the first place.

Mark brackets the story of the woman with the stories of the Jewish leaders and Judas. He thereby contrasts the woman's devotion to Jesus with those who seek, or are complicit with, his death. If the poor are such a worthy cause, as the onlookers suggest, then the Jewish leaders, who have some money, could have given it to the poor. Instead, in contrast to the woman, the leaders spend their resources to seize Jesus. For them, the death of Jesus is a better cause than ministry to the poor. Indeed, they literally "rejoiced" when Judas approached them, because they couldn't figure out how to seize Jesus by stealth. The woman used her resources to honor Jesus; Judas used Jesus to supplement his resources. The woman anoints Jesus for

burial; the leaders and Judas arrange for it. Jesus recognized the woman for favoring him over the poor because of the occasion; but Judas begins looking for an occasion—“an opportune time”—to betray him.

If you visit the ache, meet with the Lord, and seize the moment, your devotion to Jesus will stand out in contrast to the objections and schemes of those around you.

Coming out and saying it

Visit the ache and meet with the Lord. Then be sensitive to an occasion to express your love for Jesus, especially your appreciation for his sufferings. Visit the ache. Meet with the Lord. Seize the moment.

When Al Andrews, who quit the piano at age thirteen, turned forty, his wife surprised him with the gift of a piano. She gave him a copy of the sheet music he was playing when he quit. He sat on the bench, looked at the new, glistening keys and began to play. “This time,” he said, “I experienced it, enjoyed it, and knew that I wouldn’t run.”⁶

After working through Mark 14:1-11, I’ll take this occasion to come out and say it: “I just love the Lord.” Thanks to my friend, the woman I’ve gotten to know a little. And thanks to Mary, who poured out her love for Jesus at the home of Simon the leper. I’m glad that what she did was remembered.

NOTES

¹ Al Andrews, *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 175-77.

² Literary structure:

- A Chief priests and scribes seeking how to seize Jesus by stealth (1-2)
- B Woman came, broke vial, and poured perfume on Jesus’ head (3)
- C Observers protested: money could have been given to the poor (4-5)
- C’ Jesus protested: “For you always have the poor with you” (6-7)
- B’ Significance of woman’s actions (8-9)

A’ Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests, began seeking how to betray him (10-11)

³ Simon is most likely described as “the leper” in order to distinguish him from others who go by Simon, a common Jewish name. He most likely currently doesn’t suffer from leprosy. If he does, the meal would be in violation of the Mosaic Law, which forbids such contact with lepers.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 190.

⁵ *North Dallas Forty* (Paramount Pictures, 1979).

⁶ Andrews, 180.