

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Mark 14:1-9

Sermon Title: "Nothing to Divert Our Worship" (Traveling through Mark's Gospel)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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“After two days, it was the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.” Mark tells us that it is time for the Jews to celebrate one of their most holy seasons. Many preparations are being made throughout the city of Jerusalem. Thousands of people are cooking food and inviting guests, and all will gather around and remember the time when God brought ten plagues upon Egypt, and allowed Israel the opportunity to flee from slavery. There are at least a thousand stories that Mark could have told in Chapter 14 for all that is going on in the city. Mark selects two stories, however, that seem to be happening at the same time, curiously enough.

The first story involves the chief priests and scribes, Jerusalem's high-holy men. If anybody should be doing anything about the Passover, it is the chief priests and scribes. We would expect Mark to tell us a story about how the priests are performing ritual customs that have been observed for millennia. We should read about the scribes examining Scripture

and interpreting it correctly to give guidance to how to worship during this season. Prayerfully preparing themselves to remember what God did for their people: the devotion of the chief priests and scribes to God must be unparalleled.

However, what we read is the high-holy people are scheming and plotting and planning every kind of trickery and deception to go after Jesus. Their minds are not on the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. They seem to care less about all that religious stuff. No, their minds are on Jesus and not in a prayerful way. They want him dead. They want him gone from their sight. They spend the time they should be using for devotion to conjure up evil.

Now the camera, so to speak, moves over the city, from the home of the chief priests and scribes. We move over the city and out of it city to a little town called Bethany. The camera hovers over one house out of a collection of houses, and the camera zooms through the window and gives us a completely different scene.

We are now in the house of Simon the Leper. People are seated around a table with Jesus. We don't hear about them preparing for the Passover. Mark doesn't tell us that they are prepping for the holy

season per se. However, the people around that table could very well be listening to Jesus talking about the significance of the Passover and his own death.

As they sit and listen, a woman suddenly enters the room. She just appears. She has an alabaster flask in her hand, which is a container of great value in and of itself. The flask holds a perfume called spikenard, which itself is a very expensive perfume, costing one year of wages.<sup>1</sup> The perfume is only used for special occasions. Nobody owning spikenard brings it out for any ole occasion. This one woman, having spent a year's wages on this perfume and the flask, breaks the flask and dumps the perfume on Jesus. Jesus' hair is drenched, but he is not upset. The whole house fills with an aroma of flowers, kind of like walking through the perfume section of Dillard's or Macy's.

Those seated around the table are upset. They think the woman just wasted an item that could be sold for 300 denarii, and the money given to the poor. They are vocal about it, and give her the riot act.

At this very moment, the scene in Simon the Leper's house could look similar to the scene, in which the chief priests and scribes are meeting. In both stories there is arguing, and this could be happening

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<sup>1</sup> *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 988.

at the same time. Voices raised in unison but in different places. People trying loudly to get their point across. People want to go after somebody. The chief priests and scribes want to go after Jesus, and the people in Simon the Leper's house want to go after the woman. These are the similarities, but they stop when Jesus speaks. Too bad Jesus couldn't have been in both places, because when he speaks the arguments die. "Leave her alone," he says. "Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for me... She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint my body for burial."<sup>2</sup>

The chief priests and scribes are at the brink of celebrating one of the most important seasons of their lives, and they go into it not focused on God. They cannot worship God and feel the Spirit through the rituals of food and fellowship. They are not focused on God – God is not even on their minds. They are filled with anger. Their anger blinds them from understanding what God is doing. Anger blinds them from seeing who Jesus really is, not the enemy but their Salvation.

We cannot worship God, if there are distractions. If God is not on our minds, if God is not the aim of our

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 14:6, 8.

time here this morning, then our time is wasted. It isn't worth coming here, if God is not on our minds. We might as well do something else.

We Presbyterians have a Prayer of Confession in the worship bulletin. This prayer is at the beginning, because God knows we bring baggage to our worship. That baggage is heavy and difficult to lug around. What we carry in our baggage may be anger, or jealousy, or disappointment, or un-forgiveness, or any number of sins. All that weight causes us to focus on the baggage rather than on God. It's like walking through an airport, dragging a great big suitcase through the crowds of people. We are going to be focus on the suitcase, trying to get it from the parking garage to the check-in counter. This isn't an airport – this is God's house. All baggage needs to be left at the door. The Prayer of Confession helps us to let go of the baggage, and even let it go forever if possible, because we don't need to worry about it. We need to pay attention to God, set our eyes on him, because that is the main reason we are here.

Jesus once talks about forgiving a person before offering a gift to the altar. In Matthew 5 Jesus says that we might come to God in worship some day, and

then we remember a brother or sister in Christ has something against us. That becomes an unwanted distraction. We soon become preoccupied with what we did against that other person, feeling remorse and guilt. Basically we feel like idiots. Yet, we cannot concentrate on God or the gift we want to offer him, if we are worry about how idiotic was once were.

The opposite is true, if Jesus said that we might think of a brother or sister in Christ who offended us. They had something against us and took their anger and hate out on us. We feel the sting of that encounter. We don't know what we did to deserve such anger, and at first we might have pity for the other person. But if we dwell on it, if we keep going over the details of that encounter in our heads, our pity turns into anger, which might turn into vengeance. It grows and burns within us, and we want to return the favor by taking it out of them. We will justify our anger, fully believing that God wants us to be angry and hateful, because we are the innocent party.

In either case Jesus says, "Leave the altar." Leave that place of worship, because we cannot concentrate on God in worship. A distraction has entered the scene, and it must be dealt with. "Leave your gift there before the altar," Jesus says, "and go your way.

First be reconciled to your brother [or sister], and then come and offer your gift.”<sup>3</sup> Remove the distraction, and God will become more of our focus.

Dale Bruner is a Presbyterian professor and missionary (who happens to live a few doors down from my wife’s parents in Pasadena, CA) says that we break the Sixth Commandment of God from time to time.<sup>4</sup> We bear grudges, we belittle people, we call people names or ignoring them. The chief priests and scribes were having a field day in their little living space, holding grudges against Jesus, belittling him, demeaning him, and plotting to end his life. All of this sin occurring, when they should be in preparations for worshipping God during one of the most important seasons of a Jew’s life. The people in Simon the Leper’s house had unkind words for a woman who seemed to waste a year’s salary on a bottle of perfume. They begrudged, belittled, and demeaned her actions.

From time to time we get into scrapes with others. Our expectations of others are broken, and we feel the sting, and may go on the attack. Dale Bruner says that we know how to break God’s Sixth Commandment, but Jesus offers us a way to healing it. Make amends.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:24.

<sup>4</sup> *Matthew: Volume 1, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*, cf. 178.

Worship is a great time to think of others and think about how to make amends. As we focus on God, we think of our relationship with God.<sup>5</sup> We think about how we don't want that relationship ever to go away, or to be damaged in any way. But then we think of others in our worship. They go hand in hand: love of God and love of neighbor. Our relationship with God cannot be whole, if our relationships with others are not whole. As we suffer from the pain of not getting along with certain folks, so will we suffer pain in not getting along with God. We need to work on both. We need to keep both strong, and when we do our worship is enriched. Our worship is free and exciting and blessed.

So many distractions before one of the most holy seasons of the Jewish calendar. So much trash filling the minds of chief priests and scribes and dinner guests. And yet in the middle of it all is a woman with a broken alabaster jar in her hands. A simple woman enters a house, not caring if she is invited, not caring if she is interrupting anything. She has one goal in mind: anointing Jesus. She has worship on her mind, and she will not let anything divert her from that worship. She might have anticipated the guests telling

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



her to go away, and she might have believed that Jesus could tell her not to touch him. Nonetheless, she risks all. She has Christ on her mind. She breaks the costly alabaster jar, as the people around the table gasp. She pours the expensive perfume over Jesus' head, as those same people voice complaints. She gives her heart to her Lord and Savior, knowing better than anybody else that he will soon die for her sin.

“Any time the Gospel is preached,” Jesus exclaims, “she will be remembered for her devotion to me.” It is our hope that, whenever we worship, we remember to devote ourselves to the Lord without interruption. We let nothing keep us from coming close to God and being filled with the power of his grace and love.

