

12 Nov. 2017

All We Can
Mark 14:1-11

We read today a story from the last days of Jesus' ministry, found in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 14, verses 1-11.

***14** It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; ²for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'*

³ While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. ⁶But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. ⁸She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. ¹¹When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

More than anyone I know, Shane Claiborne confirms my hope for Christianity in America. Google that name. Shane Claiborne. You should know him. In one article, Claiborne writes: "Jesus didn't come to make bad people good. He came to change death to life." In other words, it's not about morality but transformation. Jesus didn't come to tweak our flaws and fine-tune us, but to start at the center and work outward to make facet of our lives more genuine and more true and more unified. Unified. We are not the most unified beings. Humans have a capacity to compartmentalize ourselves. We are capable of living our family lives, spiritual lives, work lives, financial lives, physical lives, and emotional lives in completely segregated spheres, so that a co-worker may be astonished to learn that we have children, or that we go to church, because there is no indication of that between 8 and 5 on weekdays. We take the same compartmentalizing approach to problems: abstracting each issue from everything else and working on it in isolation. But nothing exists in isolation; everything is part of something more.

Keep that in mind as we look at the scripture today from Mark. It's a familiar story. A woman empties a whole bottle of expensive perfume over Jesus, and the disciples complain because of the waste. That ointment could have been sold for enough to feed dozens of families. Their perspective is that it's a terrible use of resources. So I want to point out three things about this story. First, the disciples are right. If you just look at it as a question of the stewardship of resources, then they have an undeniable point. When we abstract the financial and practical question, we have to agree with them. So let's begin by saying that up front. They were right.

But the second thing I want to point out is that unless this woman was a cretin, she had already thought of all that. I just don't believe that after the disciples complained, this woman

said, “By George! I never thought of that! It *was* rather wasteful, wasn’t it? What was I thinking?” No, she had considered all that, and she did it anyway, so we ought to ask: Why? This probably represented her life savings, and she gave it all away in a moment in one extravagant act of worship. I still can’t explain it entirely, and I can’t imagine doing it myself, but one thing is clear. Jesus was absolutely everything to this woman. And that leads to the third thing I want to point out: Jesus affirmed the woman, saying “She has done what she could.” Why? I don’t think it’s because Jesus was impractical or because he didn’t care about feeding the poor. I think it is because Jesus’ goal is see lives transformed from the inside out, and this woman at that moment was entirely dedicated to him. That kind of change ultimately changes everything, and in Christ’s eyes that is deeper and stronger than any feeding project.

Some people can’t accept that sort of thing. It is interesting that, immediately after this incident, Judas leaves Jesus and goes to talk to the priests about handing him over. Say what you want about the high priest, he at least understands the value of money.

Today, with this background, I want to talk about money, but I don’t want to make Judas’s mistake and think about money in isolation, separate from the rest of life. If, as I’m suggesting, Christ is interested in us as whole people, wholly devoted to him, then money is certainly a part of that. But what we need is an ethic for money that reflects who we are as whole persons. And I’m going to discuss that wholistic ethic by means of a saying attributed to John Wesley: Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.

Earn all you can. A wholistic ethic for money has to begin here. Our work lives are a huge part of our whole being. We are to work hard and in this way earn money. There is nothing wrong, nothing embarrassing in that. Do what you do as well as you can, and accept what you earn with pride. Now be careful here. I’m not saying that people who earn the most money are following this ethic best. There are people who work much harder than others and yet earn less money: coal miners, sweatshop workers, teachers. There are others – many, in fact – whose full-time job right now is looking for work, and they’re not earning anything at the moment. No, the important variable is not how much you earn but the quality of work. Whatever you are paid, see that you’ve earned it by conscientious labor. Work well, and through that work, earn all you can.

But that’s only step one. The second part of a wholistic ethic of money is *Save all you can*. Once you’ve earned it, be a good steward of it. Save all you can, as opposed to *spend all you can* or *buy all you can*. In practice, this means living as simply as we can. This sort of ethic is huge, and almost un-American. But it is consistent. Having earned all we can with quality work, we don’t exchange that for garbage. We don’t go out and buy things that we do not need for no other purpose than to show that we can afford to do so. *Save all you can* means spend what we earn as thoughtfully as we are able..

And then there’s step three. Having earned what you can and saved what you can, *give all you can*. At heart, this means that now we look beyond our own needs to the needs of others. Giving what we have earned and saved is a way of acknowledging that we are not isolates. We are a part of something larger – a community, a society, humanity, the Kingdom of God.

Earn, save, give. These aren’t really new. In fact the generation of Americans who grew up in the depression and rationing of WWII internalized these messages early on. No generation has worked harder, been more personally frugal, or more generous to others. Those of us who grew up in more prosperous, comfortable times have been less notable for those qualities. There

are some signs that our recent recession has changed that somewhat for those who grew up in its midst – by most measurements, Millennials are more frugal than Baby Boomers – but as a society we still have a long way to go before we recover this wholistic attitude toward wealth.

One more thing. Just as each of us as individuals need a wholistic ethic of money so do we as a church. Churches rarely approach money that way. Usually we avoid the subject at all costs until we get desperate, and then we say whatever we think we have to say to get enough funds to support us in the style to which we've grown accustomed. That's simply wrong. Our task as a church is not to support ourselves. Our task is to make disciples, to foster the kind of deep change that I've been talking about, to knit together people's disparate parts and help them to become whole. Since money is a part of that wholeness, we should be talking about money often, but not primarily as something that people ought to be giving us more of.

You see, it's a matter of confusing goals and results. Strong giving from parishioners is not a goal of the church. The goal is to create disciples of Christ, dedicated wholly to him. Now, if we do that well, then strong giving will be one result. But we don't aim at the offering plate; we aim at the heart.

This is why I can't do what we've all come to think of as a standard stewardship pledge drive, trying to pump up enthusiasm for giving. And when I sent out pledge cards last week I wrote a letter that broke every fund-raising rule in the book. For instance, in most of the letters I admitted that sometimes churches don't deserve people's offerings, and that people should only give where they are confident that their gifts will be used well. Please don't tell the conference I did that. The department of stewardship enforcement will have me flogged. My appeal to you today, and next week as you bring those pledge cards, is not just to consider raising your pledge. My appeal is to work hard and honestly and earn all you can, to live simply and save all you can, and after that – *after* that – to give all you can for the sake of others. And as a church, I promise that we will receive all the offerings we can, operate as simply and frugally as we can, so that we too can give all we can. All we can.