

When You Remember What You Used To Be
Matthew 26:1-13

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 29, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.’

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, ‘Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.’

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, ‘Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.’

But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, ‘Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.’ (Matthew 26:1-13)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

It was Wednesday of the most pivotal week in human history.

That previous Sunday Jesus made his grand entrance, riding into town like a king on the back of a donkey as the Jerusalem crowds waved their palms and shouted, “Save us, Son of David! Save us!” The atmosphere was heavy with anticipation.

It’s only two days before the holy feast of Passover. Late in the afternoon two very different gatherings take place.

On one side of town, the religious leaders, the senior pastors and the bible scholars of that day, gather together in the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest. It’s a secret meeting to finalize plans they had talked about for years. Now was the time, they resolved, to get rid of this troublemaker once and for all. But they needed to arrest Jesus discreetly and have him condemned before his adoring crowds knew what was happening. Over dinner that night they worked out their strategy.

At that same time across town a very different sort of gathering was taking place. While the religious leaders gathered to plot Jesus’ death, the religious castaways gathered to throw a dinner party in his honor.

This second gathering took place at the home of a man named Simon. Simon was a leper. Actually, he *used to be* a leper. He used to be one of the untouchables in Jewish society. He used to be somebody who wasn’t allowed to have human contact with anybody except other lepers. He used to be hated and despised by everybody. But then one day he met Jesus and Jesus healed him. Completely. And so Simon the Leper became Simon the one who used to be a leper.

Fact is, there were a lot of “used to be’s” gathered around the dinner table that evening at Simon’s house.

Peter was there, and the brothers James and John. These were men who used to be fisherman. They used to spend their days catching perch and bass. Then they met Jesus who told them he was going to show them how to catch people instead.

Matthew was there. He used to be a tax collector. Everyone used to think of him as a traitor. Then he met Jesus and everything changed.

There's a good chance Mary Magdalene was there. Tradition has it that she used to be a prostitute.¹ She used to sell her body to men who would use her to satisfy their own lustful desires. That's what she used to be. But then *she* met Jesus and everything changed.

We know that Lazarus was there. He used to be dead. For four days he was dead in the grave, well on his way to being maggot food. But then Jesus came along and everything really changed.

Though we can't be certain, I still like to imagine who else might have been around the table that night. Maybe Bartimaeus was there. He used to be blind, but now he's got eyes like a hawk. How about the man who used to be paralyzed but can now dance? And the woman who used to have a dead daughter but now is watching her mature into a beautiful young woman? And the poor lady who used to bleed non-stop – for 12 years she couldn't stop bleeding? Maybe she was there, laughing and eating with the rest of them. And the man who used to live out among the tombs because his spirit was possessed with demons from hell? Maybe he was there as well, sitting peacefully in the corner enjoying his meal.

Do your best to picture in your mind this gathering around Simon's dinner table that night. All these "used to be's" throwing a dinner party in honor of the one who came into their lives and changed everything.

When you think about it, it's not such a different gathering than the one that is going to happen here later this week around this dinner table. This Thursday night, another collection of "used to be's" will gather around this table to throw a dinner party in honor of the one who came into our lives and changed everything. And we'll break bread, and we'll pour out the cup, and we will remember, and thank, and honor the very same Jesus who was honored that night in Bethany at Simon's house.

I want you to think about this today. Before *you* met Jesus, before Christ came into *your* life and changed everything, what did you used to be? Out of hope? Full of guilt? Addicted? Afraid? Alone? Discouraged? Worthless? Angry? Excluded? Lost? Can you remember? Think about it. What did *you* used to be before you met Jesus?



One of the other "used to be's" who was there around the table at Simon's house was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary used to be a nobody. As a woman in those days, she had always been a second-class citizen, always instructed to think of herself in very lowly terms. Remember, women in those days were considered property, first belonging to their fathers and then belonging to their husbands. In fact, women were considered such second-class citizens in ancient Jewish religious culture that they were denied full access to God's community. That's who Mary used to be. Property. Second class. Excluded. Maybe not completely worthless but certainly worth less than others.

But by now you know the story. She met Jesus and everything changed. Because Jesus, way ahead of his time, included women in his community, offered women places at the table they had never before been offered. In fact, the place and role of women in the Gospel accounts is stunning when you consider the context in which they were written. It was a woman, Mary, whom God chose to begin the Christmas story. It was women, the ones who went to the tomb early Easter Sunday, who were the first to experience the resurrected Christ. And as we're about to see, it is a woman whom Jesus chooses to begin the Passion story.

Mary used to see herself on the outside of God's community. But then she met Jesus and he welcomed her in. And in this we begin to see why it is that she does what she is about to do.

Right in the middle of this dinner party in Jesus' honor, Mary finds herself so overwhelmed with love and gratitude that she does something outrageous. Without warning, without permission, maybe even without thinking, she takes an alabaster jar full of very expensive perfume, slips up alongside Jesus as he is reclining at the table, and pours out the whole bottle on his head.

¹ Some current biblical scholarship believes that Mary was not a prostitute. In any case, there were definitely prostitutes among Jesus' followers.

I'm sure lots of us in this room where perfume or cologne. In general, we're a pretty good smelling church. I don't usually use cologne but recently somebody gave me a bottle as a gift. You always have to wonder what the subtle message might be when somebody give you a bottle of cologne. Essentially, what they're saying to you is, "Here's something that will make your body smell better. I thought you could use it." The funny thing is when my kids saw what brand of cologne I had received they told me that I couldn't wear it because according to them this particular scent was made for "young men". In defiance, I'm wearing it this morning. And I must tell you, I feel like I'm 25 again!

What does a bottle of nice cologne or perfume cost these days? \$50? \$100? Did you know that there is a perfume made by the British company Clive Christian that costs nearly \$13,000 an ounce! This super-rare, super-exclusive perfume was released in 2005. Only ten bottles were made, baccarat crystal bottles to be specific with a five-carat diamond set into the 18-carat gold collar of each bottle. One bottle retails for \$215,000. The name of the perfume is Imperial Majesty which, I think, gives us a clue as to the sort of person who buys something like this.²

Mary's perfume wasn't quite that expensive. But it wasn't far off. John's gospel tells us that Mary's bottle contained a substance called spikenard which was very expensive in those days because it had to be imported from the Himalayas in alabaster boxes. The contents of her bottle, in fact, were worth a man's full year's wages. We're talking about a \$60,000 bottle-full of perfume running down Jesus' hair and onto his tunic.³

Well, when the disciples see what Mary does – or maybe they smelled what she did – they hit the roof. They're furious. "Why this waste?" they yell at her. "Don't you realize this perfume could have been sold for an enormous sum of money. And we could have taken that money and given it to the poor. We could have fed all the homeless in Jerusalem for months! What a waste!"

And you have to admit, they've got a point. Don't they? From what they know of Jesus, from what they'd heard Jesus teach, there is no way Jesus would have wanted his followers to take that amount of money and use it in that way when it could be used to help the poor.

Some years ago I saw a news report on an enormous church down in Texas which spent nearly \$100 million to renovate their church worship space. As an example of the extravagance, they put in an orchestra pit behind the pulpit which actually can be lowered by hydraulics down into the floor. So after the orchestra has finished playing and the preacher is ready to give the sermon, all the musicians just disappear into the floor so they don't distract from the preacher!

Now maybe the people of that church claim that they spent all that money for the glory of God. And maybe they did. Still, when I saw that news story I felt a bit like I imagine the disciples must have felt. Couldn't all that money have been used for a better cause? Maybe for the poor? Is that the way Jesus would want us to use our wealth?

The disciples are furious with Mary. And they let her have it. And really, can we blame them?

But then Jesus steps in and once again everything changes. All at once Mary, the one who used to be disgraced for what she did becomes Mary the woman who is now forever honored for what she did. Jesus says, "Why do you trouble this woman? Why are you giving her such a hard time? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."

What's that all about? Why does Jesus rebuke these men? This is Jesus – right? – the greatest advocate for the poor that the world has ever seen? Can he really believe that it was better for Mary to use that perfume on him rather than on the poor? Apparently so.

After much reflection, I believe the reason Jesus honors Mary and rebukes the others is that Mary's act was an act of love. Yes, it may have been foolish. Yes, it may have made zero economic sense. Yes, if she had asked Jesus' permission beforehand, maybe Jesus would have thanked her for her gesture and then suggested instead that they save the perfume to use to help the poor. Yes, in the end Mary's impulsive act of love didn't make much sense.

² See <http://www.therichest.com/luxury/most-expensive/worlds-10-most-expensive-perfumes/9/>

³ This, by the way, dispels the popular notion that all of Jesus' followers were destitute. Obviously at least some of them were people with access to significant wealth.

It was, nonetheless, still a beautiful act of love. This is a woman who used to believe she was on the outside with God and now, because of Jesus, finds herself on the inside with God. And so at this dinner party she simply sees a chance to honor him in the best way possible. And so she doesn't calculate. She doesn't think rationally. She doesn't stop to consider what others might say. You get the sense that she is there thinking, "What is the most precious thing I can give to Jesus?" And suddenly she feels the weight of the bottle resting in her pocket and before she has time to weigh the pros and cons, the whole bottle is emptied out onto Jesus' head. And if she had a second bottle like it, she would have emptied that one as well.

Have you ever been so overcome by love for another person that you went, maybe even without thinking, and did something absolutely foolish for that person? Have you ever had that experience? I hope you have.

We've all had the opposite experience. We've all been out shopping for a gift we really didn't want to buy but we're obligated to buy, and we're thinking to ourselves, "What is the absolute least time and money I can spend on this gift and still not be accused of being cheap or thoughtless?" We've all done that. But have we ever been foolish and lavish beyond common sense in some desperate effort to simply express our love?

Have you or I ever been so overcome with love for *Christ* that, without a second thought, we gave him the most precious thing we possessed as an offering? And after we gave it, we wished we had more we could give? Some of us have had that experience. Some of us have looked at Christ and we've realized how everything changed when we met him. Remembering what we used to be before we met him, our response of love and gratitude was to give him everything, our very lives.

Jesus taught his disciples clearly. The greatest thing you can do in life is to love your God with all of yourself. All your strength. All your mind. All your heart. All your soul. And Mary, though it might not have made much economic sense, was doing exactly that.⁴ That's why Jesus would not stand by and let her be assaulted for it. "Don't bother this woman," he says. "She has performed a good service for me. You'll always have the poor with you. You won't always have me."⁵

Then Jesus says something which no doubt caught them off guard. "Not only has this woman honored me by her pure act of unselfish love," Jesus says, "but by pouring this perfume on my body she has prepared me for burial."

What a very, very strange thing for Jesus to say. You see, after a person had died in those days part of the preparation of the body for burial would have included anointing with spices and perfumes. Everybody in the room that night would have understood that. What they would not have understood was why you would do this to a person's body *before* they had even died. Why would Jesus want to be embalmed while he's still alive? He's not even sick! What is Jesus talking about?

⁴ Commentator William Barclay talks about the "economics of common sense", in which Mary was quite poor, and the "economics of love," in which Mary was quite rich.

⁵ By the way, some Christians down through history have used Jesus' comments here about the poor to suggest that Jesus wasn't really expecting his followers to try to eradicate poverty in the world since the poor will always be with us. Please understand that is a gross misunderstanding of Jesus' words here. Frankly, I don't know how anybody can read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teachings and miss the fact that caring for the poor of this world was at the very heart of Jesus' mission and kingdom. In fact, Jesus taught that when we care for the poor, we care for Jesus himself.⁵

I think Jesus' point here to the disciples, then, is that there will be plenty of time to care for the poor. And they will be expected to do so. And I think he rebukes them because they stand there talking about caring for people while, at the very same time, they are ripping into this poor woman right in front of them for an act of love she has just performed. And really, what does it matter if you talk about caring for people in general, talk about loving people from a distance, but then fail to actually love and care for the person right in front of your face? It's one thing to talk about standing up for the homeless, for instance. It's quite another thing to actually offer a hug, or even a handshake, to the homeless guy you meet downtown who smells like he hasn't taken a shower for a year. That's Jesus' point. You want to care for the poor? Why not start with the poor woman right in front of you who you just tore apart?

The world has never had a greater advocate for the poor than Jesus.

Jesus, of course, had been telling his followers for years now that his death was impending. In verse 2 of this very passage he tells them plainly that he is going to be crucified by the end of the week. And still they fail to understand, or they choose not to understand, what it is that he is about to do.

But did Mary get it? Did Mary understand what the others missed? Did Mary see that Jesus was about to die? Did she pour out that perfume that night to prepare his body for burial? Probably not. This was not the calculated act of a mortician. This was the adoring act of a woman who remembers what she used to be before she met Jesus.

Mary didn't see this as an anointing for burial. But Jesus did. That's the way he took it. *He* knew what was coming. And once again he points it out to all those around the table that night because he wants to keep them focused on that which is at hand.



This story of Mary has been sometimes called the Call to Worship of the Passion story, the alert to the followers of Jesus that the fuse has been lit. The Son of God is about to be handed over to those gathered across town. And they will mock him, and beat him, and torture him and eventually execute him in the most shameful and painful way they can think of. Jesus knows all this is about to happen. He is, in fact, willing all this to happen. This is the path God has asked him to take. This is the path he has obediently chosen to follow.

And so maybe the reason Jesus honors Mary for her unadulterated act of love is because it sets the stage for the greatest unadulterated act of love the world has ever seen. After all, it makes no sense whatsoever that the holy and righteous God of creation would send his only Son to earth to suffer and die for a race of humans who wouldn't even listen to what he had to say. God sacrificing his son for a world that hates him is pure foolishness. It makes no sense.

But sometimes, love does things that don't make sense. And could it be that God was filled with so much love for humanity that he thinks to himself, "What is the most precious thing in my possession which I can give to the world to demonstrate to them how much I love them?"

The most famous words in scripture are famous for a reason. The good news they report is almost too unbelievable, almost too foolish, almost too good to be true. **"For God so loved the world that he [did something foolish and] gave his one and only Son so that whosoever would believe in him should not perish but have life forever."**⁶

Jesus, the only Son of God, used to be on the throne of heaven. He used to be ruler over all that there is. He used to be God of all creation. But he became a poor carpenter from a peasant village in an obscure corner of the world. And not only that, he became a convicted criminal nailed and left to die on a Roman cross. And not only that, he then became a corpse left to rot in a grave. The one who used to be author of life became, for us, a dead man.⁷

And he did it all out of love. He did it all so that those of us who used to be hopeless find ourselves now filled with hope. Those of us who used to be destined for the grave are now tasting eternal life. Those of us who used to be slaves to sin are now set free. Those of us who used to be guilty are now, by God's grace, declared righteous. Those of us who used to be shut out of God's community are now given a place at the very dinner table of the Lord, a place right next to Jesus.

When you and I, like Mary, begin to realize what we used to be and, by contrast, what we are now because of Jesus Christ, what else can we do? What else can we do but come to Christ with hearts overflowing with foolish devotion and love to offer to him everything we have and everything we are.

Amen.



⁶ John 3:16.

⁷ And then, the one who used to be in the grave, came to life again, came to his throne again, came to his rightful place as king again! But of course I'm getting ahead of myself – that's next Sunday!

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 26:1-13 again. What sticks out to you from this story?
2. If you had a year's wages to blow on one extravagant gift, what would you buy and for whom?
3. If Mary had asked Jesus' permission before she poured the perfume over his head, do you think he would have allowed her to do it? Why or why not?
4. How do you feel about the disciple's indignation over what Mary did? Do they have a legitimate point or not?
5. What is the most extravagant thing you have ever done for the Lord, or given to the Lord? Any regrets afterwards?
6. If you had a year's wages to give to the cause of Christ in this world, where would you give it? Are you especially passionate about some particular organization or ministry? What's keeping you from doing that now?
7. What did you "used to be" before you met Jesus?
8. What part of your current life do you need Jesus to make into a "used to be"?