

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Extra! Extra!!

(Mark 14:1-22)

Study #27

Introduction: The problem with extravagance...

There's no place like home - and I love to be home! - but I'm grateful to God for the opportunities He's given me over the years to travel.

Thanks to the Lord's opening of doors and to the generosity of the church, I've been able to take a few trips to visit missionaries where they serve and to serve cross-culturally, myself.

The first of those cross-cultural trips took place before I came to San Antonio, though, even before I was married. During my college years I spent a summer in Germany working at the German Bible Institute in a small town just outside Darmstadt, not far from Germany's Black Forest.¹

During that summer I was mostly doing manual labor - ditch-digging and construction, along with some Bible teaching. But at the end of the summer the group of us who had worked together took a tour of some European highlights

¹ When I went backpacking a few weeks ago at Big Bend Ranch State Park with my brother-in-law, Bob, we met a German man, Klaus, who was touring Texas who had lived in the tiny village where I spent the summer of 1976 working with Greater Europe Mission, Seeheim kreis Darmstadt. Talk about a small world.

On this tour we spent a day of two in Paris, France, and the images of that city are with me to this day. The cathedral of Notre Dame (all that for a football team!) was breathtaking, as was the Eiffel Tower, and numerous other sites.

One spot in Paris, though, left a lasting impression on me. It was the palace of Versailles.

Versailles was built by the "Sun King" (Louis XIV), so nicknamed because of the opulent lifestyle he led for the seventy two years and one hundred and ten days of his reign. The palace contains more evidence of lavish affluenza per square inch than any place I have ever seen.

The outside gardens are still trimmed to perfection daily. The walkways are swept and kept spotless.

The north wing of the palace contains galleries and halls with priceless art, both paintings and sculptures. And then there is the Hall of Mirrors, where the Treaty of Versailles was signed at the end of World War I. It is ornate beyond description.

Gold-gilt finery is everywhere, and it is a testimony to an over-indulgent monarchy and one man's ugly extravagance.

While walking through the Hall of Mirrors those of us who had dug ditches in Germany all summer exchanged glances and remarked, "*So THIS is why the peasants revolted!*"

With the common folk in France living in abject poverty, the French Revolution looked reasonable in light of the extravagance we saw in the Palace of Versailles.²

Extravagance is, by definition, wasteful. It is excessive, over-the-top spending. It is spending waaaay more than is necessary.

² Similarly, when I went to what is called "The Armory" in Moscow, Russia and saw the riches of the Czars, the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 became more understandable.

It is buying a home far out of line with what is needed, driving a car that is much more luxurious than is required, flaunting opulent jewelry.

Every culture may define extravagance differently, but when someone crosses the line and lives an extravagant lifestyle, they become the object of snide comments. An extravagant lifestyle is nothing to admire. Not while children go hungry and poverty persists.

So, when we turn to Mark 14 this morning, we are a bit surprised when we find Jesus applauding an act that was over-the-top and uber-extravagant.

Even among those who saw it happen, the incident of extravagance we will explore was considered as wasteful as we today consider the Palace of Versailles' Hall of Mirrors.

However, as turned off as we might be by the extravagance of Versailles, our passage in Mark's Gospel broadens our appreciation for *some* over-the-top extravagances.

The incident in question occurred on Saturday, six days before Jesus' death. But we are going to back up to that incident after continuing for a moment to walk through the last week of Jesus' life.

The Seed of an Ugly Plot to Get Jesus! (vv. 1-2)

A Growing Citywide Excitement

Jesus has already been very busy on this week, as we have seen on previous Sundays.

On Tuesday of that last week, besides His arguments with various Jewish leaders, He also spoke about things to come (Mark 13), urging His followers (then and now) to ***“Be on the alert!”*** because they/we never knew when He might come back.

But the last week of Jesus' life was the week of Passover season in Israel. Passover was (and is) one of the three most important festivals in the Jewish year (along with Tabernacles and Pentecost).

During this Passover season the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding area was filled with Jews³ who had come from all over the world on pilgrimage to celebrate.

They worshiped while commemorating the nation's deliverance from Egypt and the exodus through the parted Red Sea fifteen hundred years earlier.

As we turn to Mark 14, it is Wednesday. There is excitement in the air. Passover is getting closer. But it turns out that not everybody is filled with a sense of worshipful anticipation.

The Intent of the Rulers (vv. 1-2)

[1] Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread was two days off; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth, and kill Him; [2] for they were saying, “Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people.”⁴

Notice. They are not now discussing WHAT should be done with Jesus - that has already been determined. They are going to kill him. They just have to decide the HOW and the WHEN.

There is a settled hatred of Jesus on the part of the rulers. He has humiliated them time and again. He has detracted from their power base. It's time to get rid of Him.

That's a sobering thing for us to read. But it is at this precise point that Mark abruptly takes us from this scene to another.

While we're thinking about the plot that is hatching to kill Jesus we're taken back in time from Jesus' final Wednesday to the previous Sabbath (Saturday).

³ The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that up to three million people flooded Jerusalem at Passover.

⁴ The rulers were living up to Jesus' description of them from Mark 12, more concerned with positioning and politicking than with acting with integrity. Note their commitment to secrecy, acting stealthily, not causing a riot, subterfuge.

On that day Jesus and the twelve apostles were resting up in Bethany, where His friends, Mary, Martha, and (the now alive again) Lazarus lived.

We know that this event occurred on Saturday because John's Gospel - where the chronology of this event is firm - tells us that what we are seeing today actually happened six days before Passover. Mark has inserted this story here for His own purposes, out of order, chronologically.

During the last week of His life, Jesus traveled back and forth between Jerusalem and Bethany (a distance of two or three miles) several times. The home of His friends was His "home base" during His final week.

Another man named Simon, who had been a leper, also lived in Bethany. While in Simon's home, Jesus received a very extravagant act of worship.⁵

A Very Costly Act of Faithful Worship (vv. 3-9)

One Woman at Worship (v. 3)

On this day we find Simon, Jesus, the twelve apostles (and possibly others) eating and relaxing after the evening meal.

Mark doesn't identify the woman who comes into the room where Jesus is relaxing - but John does. He tells us that it was Mary, and I assume that this Mary (there are several "Marys" in the Gospels) was the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

[3] 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.

⁵ See the parallel passage, Matthew 26:6-13, where the story is virtually identical. The same story with a different emphasis is given in John 12. But, Luke 7:37ff describes a different anointing altogether.

While Martha was serving, Mary walked into the room with the expensive perfume sealed in an alabaster jar in her hand, and anointed Jesus' head.⁶

As far as we know, nobody told Mary to do this. The apostles didn't motion to Mary, "Now!" Jesus certainly didn't instruct her to anoint Him.

She simply sensed that this was her *carpe diem* (seize the day) moment.

In each of our lives, opportunities arise that must be seized. They may never come our way again. She saw that NOW was the time to seize the opportunity to do something for Jesus.

And what she did was super-extravagant. It was an act of devotion above and beyond reason.

And while we might have expected Mary to do something like this (She was, after all, the sister who sat at the feet of Jesus listening to Him while Martha busied herself with household chores - Luke 10:38ff), it still took those in the room by surprise.

Now, what she did was not a secretive, private act. Everybody with a nose will know when you break and empty a quart jar of expensive perfume in a small room. It was over-the-top and in-your-face. Everybody knew what she had done the instant she did it.

And her anointing of Jesus brought about some immediate and very strong responses.

What a Waste! (vv. 4-5)

It was an act of extravagance, and acts of extravagance will always elicit a response. They will divide people, unite people, excite people, anger people. But extravagances don't leave anyone neutral.

⁶ And His feet, according to John, if we assume, as I do, that Mark and John are describing the same event.

As we listen to the responses in the room we learn that the suddenly utilitarian apostles⁷ weren't big fans of what Mary did. And they made an assessment about the value of Mary's anointing.

Being able to make valid valuations/assessments is important. Economies work because we agree about what something is worth.

The Bexar County Tax Assessor Collector's office assesses taxes on a home you own based on its appraisal of your home's market value. On a couple of occasions, Kathy and I have protested the County's assessment of our home. We thought that they thought that our home was worth more than it was really worth.

You may have tried to negotiate the price of an item you wanted to buy because you and the owner differed on the item's value.

That is what is going on here in Mark 14. The disciples assessed Mary's act of anointing as worthless because the perfume was so valuable.

Mark tells us that they were talking back and forth to each other. Can you picture the conversation? Eyes rolled back, heavy sighs...

[4] But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted?"

"Man, can you believe that!? What a ridiculous thing to do. Isn't that just like Mary!"

[5a] "For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor."⁸

"Just think of all that we could have done with the money from the sale of that perfume - for the poor, I mean. Think of all the good that could have been done for people in need if we had just sold that perfume."

[5b] ...And they were scolding her.

"Mary, that perfume you just used to anoint Jesus represented about a year's wages. That was a poor investment if I ever saw one. That was just plain foolish!"

So now we want to assess the observers' assessment of Mary's act. And what is clear is that their assessment shows them to be perfect examples of people who can fix a price on something but who don't know the real value of anything.

After Jesus had listened to the disciples' grumbling for a few minutes, He interrupted, contested the valuation that they had placed on Mary's act, and gave His own re-assessment.

Usually, when we argue a valuation with our Tax Assessor-Collector, we are hoping that the value goes down. But Jesus' re-assessment pushed the value of Mary's anointing through the roof!

Jesus Re-Assesses the Value of the Woman's Act (vv. 6-9)

Jesus, to Mary's defense

[6a] But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her?"

The Lord first sought to protect Mary from what He perceived as apostolic bullying. Today we might say, "Get off her case! Back off!" That's sort of the spirit of Jesus' words here.

He is clearly upset with the disciples for the way they are treating Mary. And He's not finished.

His next words have sometimes been taken as a callous disregard for the needs of the poor.

⁷ At least one of them was a money-grubber, according to John, but Mark doesn't tell us that.

⁸ John tells us that it was Judas Iscariot who issued the challenge about the opportunity this money presented to help the poor.

[6b] “She has done a good deed to Me. [7] 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.”

I’ll admit that it is possible to read those words and to hear Jesus saying that He didn’t care about the needs of the poor. But that is NOT AT ALL what He was saying!

Read those words carefully and it is clear that He was actually highlighting the age-long rightness of using money to meet the pressing needs of the poor.

BUT, He was also pointing out that the door of opportunity for doing one particular good deed was closing fast. Mary saw the door closing and stuck her foot in the crack.

Jesus would soon be dead and off the scene. It would soon be impossible to honor Him. Mary took the chance to honor Him while she had it and Jesus applauded her for it.

Mary’s act was the PERFECT thing to do. She did exactly the right thing in extravagantly anointing Him.

In fact, to show just how “right” her actions had been, listen to His next, very provocative words.

[8] “She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial.”¹⁰

⁹ That is either the worst case of megalomania or a stark statement of brutal honesty concerning who He is.

¹⁰ Jesus said that Mary was anointing His body for burial. But, did she know that this was what she was doing? Ray Stedman believes that Mary was intentionally preparing Him for burial, stating that only she, of all the Lord’s followers, understood what Jesus had been saying for months, that He was about to die. A.B. Bruce holds that embalming was the farthest thing from Mary’s mind. Her action was simply a festive honor done to one whom she loved unspeakably. There was no other way for Mary to express the depths of her love for Jesus, so she did this. While Jesus did apply her action to His death, I am of the mind that she was not consciously thinking of His death as she anointed Him.

[9] 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.”

I’m drawn to Mary’s act of devotion. I’ve always thought that what she did was a good thing. But I’m not sure how highly I would have ranked it among other good things people have done for Him, had Jesus not spoken these words.

What He says here, though, give Mary’s act special significance. What she did was better than I have thought it was. It was so good that this act of anointing and the message of the Gospel will go throughout the world throughout the ages hand in hand.

Hmmm...

After some reflection and some study, I have come to believe that Mary’s act is forever linked with the Gospel because her act has similarities to the Gospel. And I suggest that the two have at least the following in common.

First, Mary’s was a heart, soul, and mind, all-consuming act of LOVE.

Jesus praised Mary’s act

She acted lovingly

There was so much love in her heart for Jesus that it demanded expression. Mary’s love for Jesus had to be acted out. She had to do the most outrageous thing she could think of. She was compelled to go get an alabaster vial of expensive perfume, break the seal, and pour it on Jesus!

When the disciples objected to her action, of course, they didn’t object to her love for the Lord. They were just of the opinion that she had gone overboard in her expression.

Well-reasoned logic told them that the money represented by the perfume could have been spent in far more productive ways than anointing Jesus and stinking up a room.

And, you know, just to be honest, they've got a point. The money from the sale of the perfume could have been used in lots of good ways. AND there is no denying that the disciples did love Jesus. It wasn't as if Mary was the only one in the room that day who loved Him.

I think those thoughts and I keep thinking those thoughts - until I look at the behavior of the disciples and compare it to Mary's six days forward from this event.

Where are these indignant, utilitarian disciples? They have scattered into the night. They have deserted Jesus, scared out of their minds.

And where is Mary? She is there with Jesus right up until the bitter end, at the foot of the cross, watching Him die because the love she had for Jesus was beyond calculation of consequence or expense.

As it was for Mary, so it is for you and me today.

The greatest force moving God's people to acts of worship and devotion is LOVE.¹¹ Hearts filled with gratitude for grace received, overwhelming passion in response to God's initiative.

It was love that gave Mary the creativity to anoint Jesus. It was love that would eventually cast out fear and give Peter boldness. And it will be LOVE that will move us to express our devotion extravagantly today.

And all of this love from us to Him is an answering love. We respond in love to the One who traveled from heaven to earth to offer Himself as a sacrifice for you and me on the cross.

We love because He first loved us.

In addition to being an act of love, Mary's anointing was also a shining example of SACRIFICE.

She acted sacrificially

There is no question but that her anointing truly cost her. All the Gospels make mention of how precious this perfume was.

But in the same way that the widow who put the only two coins she had into the offering box (Mark 12), so Mary gladly and willingly gave what she had.

Jesus applauded Mary's act *because* her gift was radically sacrificial. And her anointing will be remembered along with the Gospel for all time because it mirrors the self-sacrificing character of Jesus.

He gave Himself sacrificially as a Servant throughout His perfect life. And then, at the end, He gave Himself as a literal sacrifice on the cross.

Jesus did everything that He could have done for us. Whatever was possible for Him to have endured by way of humiliation, temptation, sorrow, suffering - He did.

He never shrank back from doing the humble thing, the hard thing, the giving thing. He never embraced a way that would have led to a lessening of His sufferings.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, He "*emptied Himself.*" He made Himself poor so that we, through Him, might become rich. He became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 9)

And, because Mary's act resembled Jesus' in sacrifice, wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the whole world, what she did will accompany the message.

Finally, Mary's act was a shining example of EXTRAVAGANCE.

¹¹ Listen to the words of A.B. Bruce, "*What is needed to fill the church with original preachers, original givers, original [servants] in all departments of Christian work, is not more brains, or more training, or more opportunities - but above all, more heart.*" (Bruce, p. 311)

She acted extravagantly

There is the undeniable appearance of waste in the anointing at Bethany. Those in Simon's home saw it as a senseless, prodigal, over-the-top silliness.

Mary could have anointed Jesus just fine with a less expensive perfume or with only the amount of the perfume she chose that was necessary.

She didn't have to empty the whole container. A drop or two would have been sufficient to have effectively anointed Him.

What she did was outrageously inefficient. Pharisees understand efficiency and utilitarianism in worship.

But, Mary didn't get out her calculator and try to figure out how little of the perfume she could use and still get Jesus anointed. Her only concern was how to honor Jesus MOST completely.

And continuing on the theme of extravagance, the detractors objected to the uselessness of Mary's anointing. It didn't DO anything.

It didn't feed anybody, didn't clothe anyone, didn't move the world toward peace, or save any trees. Her act just stands there.

In its extravagance, Mary's act pictures the extravagance of Jesus' sacrifice. He did His work on the cross extravagantly. He didn't measure out His blood against the number of sinners who would be saved. He poured out Himself to death.

There was no thought of economy or efficiency when He gave Himself for us. The thought never entered His mind, "*Maybe if I just gave a pint or a quart, it would be enough.*" No. He poured out Himself to death.¹²

¹² I don't want to leave the impression that there was something "magical" about Jesus' blood. It was human blood, just as yours is. The efficacy of what Jesus did on the cross lies exactly in the fact that He, a sinless substitute, died, not in any unique properties of His blood.

Because Mary's act resembled Jesus' life and death in extravagance (and sacrifice and love), wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the whole world, what Mary has done will accompany the message.

We're going to come back in a minute to think about extravagance together one more time. But before we do that we'll look at the final piece to today's passage.

As I mentioned earlier, Mark has placed this incident out of place chronologically in his Gospel. He wanted to show the stark contrast between Mary's devotion (vv. 3-9) and the hatred and animosity of the religious rulers (vv. 1-2).

But, he also intended to show the contrast between Mary's heart and the heart of one of the disciples. For on Wednesday - not on Saturday, the day of the anointing - Judas Iscariot left his friends, and his Friend, to plan a betrayal.

The Plot to Get Jesus Hatched by Greed and Betrayal (vv. 10-11)

[10] Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests, in order to betray Him to them. [11] 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.

Here is one of the saddest sections of Scripture. But it is possible to portray Judas' act of betrayal as something other than that.

There are books that defend Judas' visit to the chief priests as a well-intentioned attempt to force Jesus to reveal Himself as the King. You may have seen a film version of this story where Judas is excused from guilt because he was misled or because he misunderstood what Jesus was all about.

Mark halts that line of thinking with the blunt words about Judas' intent to betray Him. Judas deliberately sought out the chief priests so that he could turn Him over to them for money.¹³

¹³ John tells us that Judas sought to hand Jesus over because of greed.

Judas knew exactly what he was doing. So, along with the chief priests and rulers, Judas, one of the twelve, becomes a chief villain of the story. And he is set right next to the heroine, Mary.

Judas placed a valuation on the life of Jesus (thirty pieces of silver), while Mary's valuation of Jesus' worth knew no bounds.

Conclusion:

I find it fascinating that in the later parts of his book Mark records two acts performed by two women.

First, a widow with no money to speak of gives away the only two half pennies she has, a gift that (practically speaking) did nothing more than help support a corrupt religious enterprise.

Then, another woman anoints Jesus with a quart of perfume, the value of which could have been used to feed, clothe, and house dozens of people.

When the smoke cleared, Jesus told us that the widow's act was the greatest example of giving He had ever seen, and told detractors that Mary's anointing was so RIGHT that wherever the Gospel is preached, the story of what she had done would accompany the message.

Clearly, Jesus ENJOYS receiving extravagant worship from His people.

He demonstrated His own willingness to be extravagant when He poured out His life for us. And now it is time for us to ask if the spirit of the widow or of Mary resides in us.

What is there in your life, in mine, of extravagance? What are the barriers to extravagance? Fear? Greed? A calculating mindset?

What would extravagance look like if you were to embrace it? What if we as a church were to do so?

God is calling you and me to let loose an un-self-conscious extravagant life on a world waiting to see passion for God.