

# A Beautiful Thing

Mark 14:1-9; Philippians 2:5-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Palm Sunday usually puts us in the middle of a crowd.

We are there with the people of Jerusalem with our palm branches and our great expectations, welcoming the unexpected king whose “triumphal” entry into the city takes place on the back of a donkey.

We are there shouting “Hosanna” and waving our palm branches. *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*

But given the year we’ve all been through and given the road we have yet to walk in this pandemic, given the gathering restrictions that persist, given the fact that we remain a small group in this church sanctuary... given all of this, I thought this would be a good year to take a break from the crowd.

I’m sure Dr. Hinshaw would approve. ☺

This morning, we’re not on the parade route with Jesus but in a humble home. The home of Simon the Leper.

We are mid-week, a few days after Jesus enters the city but a day before the dark story that we will tell on Maundy Thursday. We are kind of in the calm before the storm.

Around a table. A few friends. A relaxed meal.

(Actually, Dr. Hinshaw probably wouldn’t approve of this, but maybe it’s better than a throng of worshippers.)

And then, an unexpected interruption.

We’ll get to the story. But first, I hope you’ll permit me a bit of a diversion.

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A few weeks ago, I came across an article by James K.A. Smith in the Christian Century last week that has stuck with me ever since. It's called "I'm a philosopher. We can't think our way out of this mess."<sup>1</sup>

You could characterize it as something like a theological mid-life crisis, although that would be an unflattering way to put it. Perhaps more of an unlearning or a sharpening of focus or recalibrating.

Smith is a Christian and a philosopher. I've attended several of his lectures over the years. I have a handful of his book in my study. Back when I was in university and graduate school, I admired him for being what I aspired to be. Tough-minded. Philosophically astute. A thinking Christian.

He is a smart guy. When I was in grad school, I read this book. It's by a philosopher named Charles Taylor and is called *A Secular Age*. It's basically nothing less than an interpretation of theological, cultural, and philosophical history. Some have called it one of the most important books of the last half century.

It's brilliant. But it is *tough* sledding. Almost nine hundred pages of dense analysis. James Smith wrote his own book to explain it to other people and did so in less than one hundred fifty pages. So, smart guy.

Smith grew up in an evangelical church and entered young adulthood more or less convinced that his calling in life was to learn enough smart God facts to convince other people of said God facts.

This is what professors and pastors are for, right? To tell people what to think. To help them get their ideas about God straight. Salvation surely lies down this path. Right?

Well, wrong, as it happens. Smith discovered this around mid-life when he sunk into a depression that no analysis or reason could lift him out of. He was confronting painful realities that all the right ideas in the world were no match for. It wasn't all of his good ideas about God but the faithful presence of a friend that pointed him toward the light.

And it got him thinking that perhaps human beings are more than just thinking things. We need more than ideas. Listen to what he says:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/i-m-philosopher-we-can-t-think-our-way-out-mess>

It's not that I've given up on truth. It's just that I'm less confident we'll think our way out of the morass and malaise in which we find ourselves. Analysis won't save us. **And the truth of the gospel is less a message to be taught than a mystery enacted.**

Near the end of his article, Smith talks about how it will be the arts, not arguments, that will resuscitate imaginations up to the task of living faithfully and bearing witness to the light:

I'm throwing in my lot with the poets and painters, the novelists and songwriters. While Plato [the famous philosopher] would exile them from his ideal city, these artists are the unacknowledged legislators of the city of God.

I love that last line.

According to Smith, "The logician speaks a tongue that's foreign to the heart." Again, this is a guy who has spent over half his life on logic and philosophy and reasonable arguments for faith and theology and biblical interpretation. That's a sobering conclusion to come to!

I find myself agreeing with him.

It's not that I all of a sudden have no use for logic or arguments or philosophy or theology or anything like that. No one who reads what I write or listens to what I say would ever come to that conclusion.

But like Smith, I think I have come to a point in my life where I am deeply aware of the limits of these endeavours. God is not a logic proof. The life of faith is not an argument or a solution to a rational problem.

The gospel is not the "system" that we so often and eagerly reduce it to. It is a story and a song.

And you and I are not data machines in need of the right inputs. We are lovers who need to be loved into remembering. We are dreamers in need of more expansive imaginations. We are a ragged choir in need of a better song.

More and more I am convinced that it is the beauty and the goodness of God that are far more compelling ways to God than reason and logic and arguments.

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Ok, back to our story. In Mark 14:6, Jesus draws our attention to a beautiful thing.

We've heard the story already. It's a story that shows up in all four gospels. Sort of.

Matthew and John tell the same story as Mark with a few variations. Luke tells a similar but most likely different story from a much earlier part of Jesus' ministry.

All four have a house, a meal, a woman, and expensive perfume poured on Jesus (either his head or his feet, in Luke's case). In all four gospels, someone loudly objects.

John identifies the woman as Mary of Bethany. In Luke's story, it's "a woman in that town who lived a sinful life"—which has usually been taken to mean a prostitute. Matthew and Mark just say, "a woman."

We tend to put all four stories together in our imaginations and come to the conclusion that the "sinful woman" in Luke's story is the same as the woman in the other three gospels, but this is most likely not the case.

So, most likely two different stories—one by Luke, one by the other three—told in different ways by the four gospel writers.

Some people worry about the discrepancies. I like to think of the four gospel writers as artists who each have their own unique emphases as they paint the story of Jesus.

This week, in light of everything I have said about logic and beauty and how we come to God, I was drawn to Jesus' response to those who criticized the wasteful extravagance of the woman's actions:

Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing.

A beautiful thing.

Why does Jesus say this? What's beautiful about dumping out an expensive jar of perfume on someone's head?

The pragmatists among us were probably nodding along with the critics during the reading of the story. Think of how much good that could have been done if the perfume were sold and given to the poor! A year's wages is no small amount.

What if we were to spend half of our annual church budget on flowers for next Sunday's Easter Sunday display? That would certainly test our Mennonite frugality!

(You'll be relieved to know that we have not done this!)

What's beautiful about what this woman does?

Well, Jesus tells us. She has poured out all that she had, caring nothing for the cost or what those gathered might think. She has simultaneously anointed Jesus as king and prepared his body for burial.

I don't know how much this woman knew about what she was doing. Did she intend all this symbolism or was this the interpretation Jesus gave to her actions? It's not clear.

But I do know that this unnamed woman seemed to "get it" more than the men in the story. Not for the first or the last time.

Jesus' disciples would never listen when Jesus said he was going to die. Peter famously rebuked him for it. *This will never happen to you!* And Jesus promptly compared him to Satan and told him to stand aside. He was out of step with God's purposes and plan.

The men who walked and talked with Jesus, who sat at his feet for three years, could not conceive that Jesus had come to Jerusalem to die.

Like at the empty tomb it is a woman who gets it first.

This unnamed woman somehow knows that Jesus will die. She doesn't try to talk Jesus out of it or deny it or pretend it's something other than it is. She somehow seems to know what's coming.

And she spends her last moments with Jesus in an extravagant act of symbolic devotion and worship.

James Smith said that "The truth of the gospel is less a message to be taught than a mystery enacted."

The mystery being enacted here is obvious enough, isn't it?

The emptying of the perfume, the breaking of the vessel—both point to another emptying and another breaking.

The breaking of Jesus' body. And the self-emptying love of God displayed on Calvary's cross.

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Our second text this morning is the famous Christ hymn of Philippians 2. Many scholars believe that this hymn represents one of the earliest liturgies of the early church, possibly even going back to a few decades after Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

It provides a fascinating window into both how the early church worshiped, who they understood Jesus to be, and what it all meant.

Halfway through the passage we read these words: *Therefore, God lifted him high...*

One of my professors in graduate school used to say, "Whenever you see the word 'therefore' in Scripture, you should always ask, 'What is the therefore there for?'"

It's a good question. And in this case, rewinding a few verses before the "therefore" shows us what it's there for.

When I was a kid, I would read sentences like "God lifted him high" and "the name above every name" and "every knee would bend" and "every tongue confess" as something like God's revenge upon the godless unbelievers who refused to acknowledge his obvious greatness or rightness or bestness.

Kind of like the moment at the end of the movie where you realize that the protagonist has had a trick up his sleeve the whole time and is gloriously vindicated while his enemies are humiliated.

One day, everyone will see that Jesus was right and—even better—that *I* was right, whether they want to or not! Not the most inspiring or mature of interpretations, but there you go.

My approach to the Christ hymn has evolved a bit since my childhood days. While there certainly is an important aspect of vindication in this and other formulations about the victory achieved on the cross, and while there is an aspect of this victory representing a kind of humiliation of the powers that executed him, that "therefore" is a game changer.

These are the verses that immediately precede the "therefore":

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
**but emptied himself,**  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

All of that lofty language about exaltation and knees bowing and tongues confessing is the result of the profoundly un-lofty form that divinity took.

Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, he “emptied himself,” he took the form of a slave, he “humbled himself,” he became obedient.

And ultimately, of course, he died the shameful death of a traitor, being mocked, spat upon, abandoned, and rejected, even by those closest to him.

This is what leads to the exaltation. This is what leads to Jesus’ name being above all names. This is why knees will bend and tongues confess.

This is the expression of divinity to which God says, “Yes. This is who I am.”

On the cross, God pours himself out in Christ, to expose and judge the sickness of our sin, and to reveal the depth of his love.

On the cross, God, in Christ, extends mercy to the very ones driving the nails into his hands and feet. *Forgive them... They don't know what they're doing.*

**On the cross, Jesus is cracked open, and the healing, liberating, cleansing, forgiving love of God is poured out over all creation.**

Our knees will ultimately bend not out of coercion or fear, but awe and love. We will be drawn to God not because of an argument or a logical equation or a formula of salvation but because of the beauty of a God who would go to these lengths to rescue and to redeem.

At the end of our reading from Mark today, Jesus says these words:

Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.

This beautiful thing has echoed down through the ages. This act of devotion, this preparation for the emptying that would save the world.

The great nineteenth century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky once said that “beauty will save the world.”

We are entering into Holy Week. There is much that is ugly about the events that take place between Palm Sunday and Easter.

There is betrayal and malice.

There is accusation and cowardice. There is the scandalous injustice of a farcical trial.

There is cruel mockery and brutal violence. There are tears of sorrow and cries of fear.

The earth itself will convulse at the horror of human beings murdering the very one in whose image they are made.

These things are not beautiful. They are repulsive. They make us instinctively want to turn away, not least because we know that we are implicated in this story.

But all of these ugly things are gathered up, healed, and transformed by the beauty of the love of Christ, and woven into a tapestry of salvation.

It is indeed beauty that will save the world.

May we like the unnamed woman in the house of Simon the Leper offer our best, living lives of extravagant love and mercy in response.

Amen.

