

Mar. 8, 2015 – Mark 14:3-9

I Tell You the Truth...Fruits of Faith will be Remembered

Many books on success ask the question: “What do you want to be remembered for?” To help you answer this, they often suggest the exercise of writing your own obituary or coming up with the words you would like placed on your gravestone. This question and these exercises are supposed to help you find your “core values” so that you can focus on what is most important to you in your life.

Mark 14:3-9 tells us about the legacy of one woman and the memorial that Jesus Himself set up for her.

John fills in some of the details in his record of this dinner at the house of Simon the leper (see John 12:1-8). From John’s account we learn that Jesus and His disciples came to Bethany six days before the Passover. This would have been Friday before Holy Week. Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, lived in Bethany with his sisters Martha and Mary. On Saturday they gave a dinner for Jesus at the home of Simon the leper. This dinner is the only time we hear of this Simon. We assume that he was no longer a leper, otherwise he would not be living in the city and people would not be associating with him. Jesus healed many people with leprosy and other diseases; it is safe to say that it was Jesus who had healed Simon of his disease sometime in the past. This healing was evidently well-known in the area so that both Matthew and Mark could refer to him as “*Simon the leper*” – a title he may have proudly accepted because it reminded everyone of what Jesus had done for him.

Martha was serving – just as she had done when Jesus came to Bethany before – the time when her sister Mary had made her angry by sitting at Jesus’ feet instead of helping her serve. At this dinner in Simon’s house, Mary came with an alabaster flask of very costly, pure perfume. She broke the narrow neck and poured it on Jesus’ head so that it flowed down even to His feet (see John 12:3). She anointed Jesus from head to toe and the fragrance filled the house. The value of this perfume was over three hundred denarii. A denarius was the typical wage for a day’s labor (see Matthew 20:2). Using just the minimum wage here in Michigan of \$8.15/hour, for 8 hours a day, for 300 days we get a cost of just under \$20,000.

If you were at this dinner, what would your reaction be to this scene? Some of Jesus’ disciples said: “What a waste!” And they criticized Mary sharply. Just think of what they could have done with that \$20,000! Here it was all just poured out over Jesus and gone just like that!

When I hear this account, I am conflicted. On the one hand, Mary’s love and devotion to Jesus are amazing and admirable. It was a beautiful thing she did for Him. And the expense! In the events of the coming week she would not have another opportunity to anoint Jesus’ body for burial, so she did it at this dinner. But on the other hand, I tend to agree with the disciples. Wouldn’t it have been better to use the money for something else, like giving to the poor, or supporting the mission work that the disciples would be doing?

But Jesus came to Mary’s defense and said another “I tell you the truth” statement: “*wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.*” The fact that we are talking about what Mary did at this dinner almost 2000 years ago on the other side of the world shows that these words of Jesus have been fulfilled. But why would Jesus single out what Mary did here as something that will be told throughout the world? Doesn’t it seem like there would be more important things to include with the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection?

We naturally tend to elevate doing good to others, like helping the poor. We applaud the Mother Teresas of the world. And God does encourage us to do good and help others. Jesus said to the rich young man: “Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). The problem comes in when we make these good works our focus, and make it the purpose of the church.

What Mary did challenges us to think about what is most important to us. Jesus called what Mary did “a good work for Me.” He went to point to His death: “*She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial.*” Jesus knew that in less than 6 days He would be hanging on the cross in agony, suffering for the sins of us all – that He would die the death we deserve, forsaken by God. Mary’s focus was on Jesus’ death for her sins. And that is to be our focus as well. Not just His death, but also His resurrection from the dead which showed that He has conquered death and removed the power of sin.

Without Jesus’ death and resurrection, all our good works do nothing but make this world a slightly better place. Without faith in Jesus, we could spend our lives helping the poor, but we still would not please God (see Hebrew 11:6). God makes it clear that we are not saved by our works, no matter how noble and great they may seem to us. We are saved only by Jesus’ work in our place – His perfect life of obedience to God that ended in His death so that your sins have been taken away.

What Mary’s act and Jesus’ words there tell us is that Jesus is the most important thing. It may sound odd, but honoring Jesus is more important than helping the poor.

That is not to say the two are mutually exclusive. We will help others, but not as a means to an end – not in order to please God or earn His favor – but as a natural consequence of our love and devotion to the One who has bought us with the price of His flesh and blood – the price of His very life. Good works will be a fruit of our faith.

Why did Mary sacrifice so much? It was not to earn Jesus’ praise, but it was out of love for Him and to express her thanks for what He had done and was about to do for her. She had listened to Jesus’ words as she sat at His feet those many months ago. Months later she had gone with Him to her brother’s tomb and saw her brother come back to life at Jesus’ command. This resurrection was just a foretaste of the eternal life that Jesus brought to her and that He brings to us. And she knew that Jesus was about to give His life in exchange for hers. When she added up all that Jesus had done for her, she came to the conclusion that Jesus was worth it. In fact, Jesus words may imply that she would have liked to have done more. “*She has done what she could,*” He said.

How much is Jesus worth to you? It really comes down to this question: “Is Jesus worth it?” Is He worth our time? Our money? Our sacrifice? The world would say, “No.” The world looks at the time and effort we put into church and telling others about Jesus’ death and resurrection and thinks that it is waste – our time, effort, and money would be better spent on things like volunteering at a soup kitchen on Sunday mornings. Often our sinful flesh also says “No!” – there are other things that we could be doing with our time and our money.

But our faith agrees with what Mary did and wants to do the same. We want to honor and thank Jesus for His great sacrifice. We cannot calculate the cost with which we were bought – the cost of the only Son of God becoming flesh, living a sinless life among us, and dying on the cross to reconcile us to God and earn us eternal life. We love God because He first loved us and gave Himself up as a sacrifice for us all.

In the words of hymn 175 (The Lutheran Hymnal), when we survey the wondrous cross,

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,

That were a tribute far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

There is no tribute that we could bring that would be sufficient for what God has done for us in giving His only begotten Son. As expensive as Mary’s perfume was, Jesus is worth even more.

But Jesus, to whom belongs the heavens and earth, accepted her tribute, and said, “*wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.*” Jesus tells us that fruits of faith will be remembered.

As Lutherans, we may shy away from talking about good works, because it is so easy for people to latch on to the good we do as a way to earn our salvation or earn God’s favor. Martin Luther restored the truth taught by God in His word that we are saved by God’s grace, apart from works. But God also says we are created in Christ for good works (Ephesians 2:10). These works are fruits of our faith, fruits that He works in us.

Jesus here tells us that these fruits will be remembered. Jesus delights in the good things we do out of faith in Him. Hebrews 13:16 says: “*But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.*”

We do not do good works to please God, but God is pleased by the good works that we do. That may seem like a small distinction, but it is an important one. You have God’s undeserved favor already. Through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross your sins are forgiven and you have been made God’s child and have a place in heaven apart from anything you do. You do not need do anything to earn God’s love, you have it already. But that does not mean that God does not delight in the good things that you do out love for Him – He does!

One of the last parables Jesus ever told was the “parable of the talents” (Matthew 25:14-30). A man left for a far country and entrusted his servants with three different amounts of money. Two of the servants used what the master had given them. To each he said, “*Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord*” (Matthew 25:21, 23). This picture of the kingdom of heaven illustrates how our Lord is pleased by our fruits of faith. The fruits He produces in us.

And it is not just the grand gestures, like Mary’s costly perfume, that bring pleasure to God, but the small things as well. It isn’t the amount that God considers but the devotion. When Jesus was watching people putting money into the offering box, He pointed out the poor widow who put her last two small coins. The fruits of your faith, no matter how small and insignificant they may seem, will be remembered.

When Jesus returns, He will say, “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me*” (Matthew 25:34-35). We will not even realize that we did these things, because our focus was on our Savior who loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

May you, like Mary, fix your eyes on Jesus and on His death on the cross in your place. May you love Him, without calculating the cost, because He first loved you and gave Himself up for your salvation. And may He produce in you fruits of faith – fruits that the world may not remember, but fruits of faith that will be remembered when Jesus welcomes you into His eternal kingdom.

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