

Breaking Alabaster Jars (Mark 14:3-9)

Sermon by Dr. Joel Weaver

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I would like to begin by apologizing to our many graduate students here at Calvary. I know some of you were hoping to supplement your income by playing a little Mary Alice Birdwhistell sermon bingo this morning. Alas, there are no Frederick Buechner or Henri Nouwen quotations. Nor is there a single mention—due to what can only be regarded as sloppiness on my part—of any female preacher with three names, such as Barbara Brown Taylor. Unless, of course, you are a loose constructionist and you want to count the previous three sentences. In that case, Sara Dye, you are on your way! Nevertheless, I do want to put everyone’s mind at ease. For the sake of continuity and the maintenance of long-cherished Calvary traditions, this sermon does contain a childhood story from Kentucky.

This sermon is an edited version of the one I preached this year on the occasion of my father’s retirement from the First Baptist Church of Valdosta, Georgia, after 47 years... A retirement which lasted all of 3 months, as he is now serving part-time as their Minister of Missions. Mary Alice felt that the story that I am going to share with you today reflects both of our recent proclamation themes, the image of God and abundance.

This morning we are going to begin by looking at one of the more misunderstood statements of Jesus, found in Mark 14:7, “The poor you will always have with you...” These words are found in the story of Jesus’ anointing in Bethany. This story is surrounded by a narrative frame that points to its function, an outer framing that suggests what the inner section is *really* about. Whereas *we* use paragraphs and headings to group and identify subject matter, ancient authors—who, by the way, did not use spaces between words or any punctuation at all—*they* put brackets around a story by using different literary devices. Sometimes they used the repetition of simple words and phrases... Sometimes whole stories of a similar type... Sometimes one story is split

apart, with a second story inserted in the middle. And sometimes, as in today's passage, the material before and after contains a shared theme.

In Mark 14:1-2, the chief priests and teachers of the law are plotting to arrest and kill Jesus, while in Mark 14:10-11, one of Jesus' very own disciples is planning to betray him to them. And so, the story in between serves to foreshadow the ultimate fate of Jesus. It is a story that anticipates the cross.

In this passage, Mark 14:3-9, Jesus, like the kings of ancient Israel, is being anointed. Yet *this* scene is full of irony... It is not quite what one would expect. Jesus' anointing was:

- Not in the temple, but in the house of Simon, the tanner
- Not by the high priest, but an anonymous woman
- Not accompanied by acclaim, but by criticism
- Not for a long life and reign... Jesus was anointed for death.

“Soon may he die” just doesn't have the same ring as the phrase “Long live the king!”

In the Gospel of Mark, the disciples never grasp what is going on. They are frequently contrasted with the outsider, the person we least expect, who shows up and recognizes what God is doing. It is an effective literary device, because each time the disciples fail to grasp the message or its significance, it serves as a giant red flag pointing us, the readers, Jesus' 21st century disciples, toward what *we* need to see. In this story, the anonymous woman fulfills that role. She perceives the gravity of the impending moment, and she “goes all in.” This is no token gesture on her part. She breaks an expensive jar made of alabaster (just as Jesus' body will be broken) and she pours out an ointment of pure, expensive nard (just as Jesus' life will also soon be poured out).

Now what in the world is nard? Nard is perhaps the most unfortunately named perfume ever. “Hey, honey, what is that scent you're wearing?” Nard. (Nevermind gesture). How would you even market that? *Nard. By Calvin Klein. Because sometimes*

you just want him to leave you alone. At any rate, one of the ingredients of nard was imported from the area that is now Nepal. That would be expensive today; just imagine what would be involved in transporting something from that region in antiquity. And you know it wasn't covered by Amazon Prime. According to our complaining disciples, this bottle could have been sold for 300 denarii (300 Roman silver coins), which would be almost a year's wages for most workers.

And so, in response to this extravagant gesture, some of his followers proclaim this act a waste, revealing their blindness to its significance. This woman's act paints a picture of Mark's christology, Mark's portrait of Jesus... the Christ, the Messiah, is one who is anointed to suffer for others; he breaks his body, and pours out his life on the cross. Speaking of her action, Jesus says—literally in the Greek—“She has done a *good work*.”

And yet some who are with him see only a waste. This woman's extravagant gesture, this anointing of Jesus' body for burial, *was* a one-time thing, just like Jesus' death on the cross. Nevertheless, these *singular* acts of sacrifice serve as standards by which all our good works are measured.

The Feast of the Passover, much like Christmas for us, was a time for remembering the poor. Those with Jesus grumble that this valuable jar of perfumed ointment could have been sold with its proceeds going to the poor. To this, Jesus responds, “You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.” As we have noted already, this was a one-time act; this woman recognized the Messianic moment, and anointed Jesus for burial. In fact, soon after this event, the disciples no longer had Jesus in the flesh. So how are *we* to read the first portion of verse 7? “For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish.”

Unfortunately, these words of Jesus' have been read as an acknowledgement that poverty is inevitable and perpetual. Poverty... what are you going to do about it? Well, Jesus gives us a suggestion by alluding to Deuteronomy 15:11, which states that there will always be those in need on the earth. Deuteronomy 15 is the chapter that talks about the sabbatical year, which calls for cancelling debts every 7th year. It talks about giving to those in need liberally, without being tight-fisted. It instructs the people to take care of anyone in need in their neighborhood or town. **I want you to listen to the words of Deuteronomy 15:4-5:**

4 There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, **5** if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.

There will be no one in need... if only you will obey... Given that our Anointing scene at Bethany is so filled with irony, I suggest that Jesus' statement regarding the poor is an ironic rebuke. Jesus is essentially saying **this** to his disciples:

“The poor will always be with you, because you never obey God’s commands. Sure, you *can* give to them whenever you want, but why is that only on holidays? Remember that time when we fed that crowd of 5,000 hungry people? You were not exactly eager to part with 200 denarii of your own money to buy bread for them, were you? Why is it that you guys cannot go all in like the woman with the nard, or that widow who gave her only two copper pennies. And by the way, don’t even get me started on how there could possibly be a widow in Israel that is down to her last two pennies in the first place. What in the world is going on down here? Have any of you actually read the assigned reading in the syllabus from Deuteronomy 15?”

The problems that lead to families being caught in a cycle of poverty are complex, and the sheer scale of the problem worldwide makes any attempt to address it systemically seem overwhelming. I don't have a 7 Step Program for Eliminating Poverty and the Ever-Widening Gap between Rich and Poor. Instead, I plan to follow the lead of the gospel writers who simply told the story of Jesus. Narratives draw us in... they challenge us... they help us see things from a different point of view... they paint pictures, giving us a vision of what is possible. *Stories* inspire us to join in, to join our lives to the larger narrative of the Kingdom of God. And so today, I am going to tell you a story about one family that escaped that cycle of poverty.

How many of you are 47 years of age or younger? Well, my father, the Reverend Mac Weaver, has been at the First Baptist Church of Valdosta, Georgia your entire life. The people of Valdosta, Georgia know him as a church leader and a civic leader. He is the one people call in south Georgia to get things done. The younger people at the church call him Mr. Mac. And thanks to 90s hip-hop duo Kriss Kross, a number of his friends in the African-American community and, now his grandchildren, call him Daddy Mac. To many people in Valdosta, he has always been Mr. Mac. But they don't know the story of how he got there.

He was born on June 2, 1942, in Scottsboro, Alabama to Odis and Nancy Weaver. Mac is one of ten children. He was named MacArthur after General Douglas MacArthur. He has no middle name; I don't think the family could afford one. Just MacArthur Weaver. He had one brother named after President Franklin D. Roosevelt. But he was not named Franklin Delano, but rather Franklin Dee. But my poor father, he could not even get a phonetically spelled initial. Mac was not born in a hospital. His mother worked in the fields all morning on the day of his birth; she delivered him in the afternoon, and then she returned to the fields the very next morning. Soon after his birth, the family moved to the area of Grant, Alabama, on Sand Mountain.

Mac's father operated a syrup mill that someone else owned, and he was gifted at making rocking chairs that he sold on the side. Mac has one lasting image of his father, and that is of him sitting, while being very ill, in a rocking chair. Their family was what we would call the working poor. They got by, but they were living at a subsistence level. And as is always the case in such situations, there was no safety net. Life was hard, but manageable... just as long as nothing went wrong. Unfortunately, something did go wrong. Mac was five when his father died. The birth certificate says he died of the heart dropsy, which we would call congestive heart failure.

The day his father died, Mac hid under the bed, afraid to come out, because he knew something was very wrong, and that things would never be the same again. On the day of the funeral, he was left behind, somehow missing the wagon into town. He remembers running along rows of cotton which never seemed to end, thinking he would never get there on time. He finally made it there to say goodbye to his father, but he was late, very late. To this day, he feels a little surge of panic whenever he passes by a funeral home, which is quite unfortunate when you are the one who does all of the funerals.

After his father's death, his mom became a sharecropper—a tenant farmer paying rent by means of a percentage of the produce. And so, they moved around from shack to shack as she looked for a better deal. I asked Dad where he lived during this time, and he replied, "In almost every house on that mountain." These were houses that should have been condemned, but no one from the government ever bothered going up there. Mac worked with his family in the corn fields and cotton fields, and he went to school, but only when he was not working, or when he felt like it. Mac skipped two grades in elementary school. Now, I don't mean skipped *ahead*... He just skipped them, as in, did not show up.

As a boy, Mac enjoyed exploring and playing on the mountain, working in the fields, and not going to school. He had exciting hobbies like stealing watermelons and

shooting rats in the kitchen. What 8 year old boy wouldn't like that? Unfortunately, I never got to do that while growing up in the suburbs in south Georgia, but then we did not have any rats in our house. But that's probably because the rats were too afraid of the gigantic cockroaches there. I'm here to tell you, not *everything* is bigger in Texas!

One day when my father was 12, someone showed up without warning from the Alabama State Welfare Agency, telling him, "We are taking you to a new place to live." Mac remembers feeling sad; he was losing his freedom and everything he had ever known. To this day, he still does not know who or what events set this intervention in motion. There was no abuse in their family; just too many mouths to feed. And so, Mac and his 10-year-old twin sisters, Hellen and Ellen, were taken to Troy, Alabama, to live in the Alabama Baptist Children's Home.

Mac was amazed at what awaited him at the Children's home in Troy. Not only did they feed him *every* day, they fed him 3 *times* a day! He had a bed to sleep in. And they even bought him clothes! Before the children's home, his wardrobe consisted of one pair of overalls. You washed them once a week, and there was nothing else to wear while they were being washed and dried. And I mean nothing else! Mac did not know that underwear was actually a thing, and he never had a pair of shoes that were actually bought for him. Sometimes he would get hold of a second-hand pair.

The Children's Home in Troy was on a 700-acre farm, where he milked cows and worked with cattle. Everyone had their chores. He also had to go to school. The problem was: he was *way* behind... way, way behind. How many of you here are in the 7th grade? When my father was in the 7th grade, he did not know how to read. He had a teacher named Mrs. Brown, and he was so thankful that she never called on him to read. He would sit there hour after hour, daydreaming about playing football. One day Mrs. Brown had him stay after school, and she said to him, "You don't know how to read, do you?" He replied, "No, Ma'am." Then she asked, "Would you like to learn?" And he said, "Yes!" Mrs. Brown met with Mac after school every single day, and he picked it up

very quickly. And he absolutely loved it... reading introduced him to a world that he never imagined could exist. Mrs. Brown never embarrassed him, and she never revealed his secret; she simply gave him her time and encouragement.

The best part of the Children's Home was a married couple, L.D. and Maggie McGee. L.D. was known as Fat Daddy, and he had been the Chief of Police in Lynette, Alabama. When his last child left the house, he retired from the force, and he and Maggie moved to Troy to live in one house with 24 boys. They were paid something, but it certainly was not commensurate with what they did. And it all went toward those boys anyway. Fat Daddy and Momma McGee *became* Mac's parents, a relationship which lasted until their deaths. I knew them only as my grandparents. Like the woman with the two pennies in the gospels, what they had, they gave. Like the woman with the alabaster jar, they did a good work. And *what they poured out* was lavish and extravagant.

As high school came to an end, the football coaches from Troy State, Florida State, and Georgia Tech came calling. He was sent Letters of Intent for signing day. But Mac blew out his knee, and in those days, there was no coming back from that. A high school math teacher, who had administered an aptitude test, told Mac that he ought not bother with college; it would be... well, a waste of his time. But he had been turned on to a world of books, and he had no intention of giving it up. So, he took the 100 dollars that the Home gave to each kid as they left, and he headed to Jasper, Alabama, to go to Walker Junior College. He would figure out a way to pay for it. He landed a job as Youth Minister at the First Baptist Church of Jasper. The church organist was a Samford student who drove up from Birmingham each weekend. He married her, and they followed the pastor of that church to First Baptist, Lake Charles, Louisiana.

I was born during their time there. Meanwhile, Dad earned a BA in History as well as a Masters of Education & Administration at McNeese State. His plan was to be a principal and eventually a superintendent. However, after receiving a call to ministry, our family headed to Louisville, Kentucky in 1968 for Mac to attend seminary.

From 1964 to 1971, the first seven years of their marriage, life was hard. Working and going to school and being a parent was tough. When my mom filed their taxes in 1969, she filled out 12 W2 forms for my father. That's a number that even our own Jeremy Crews would be proud of. They both were going from early morning to late at night, every single day. Looking back on that time, Mac says, "We did not have time to be who we were, because we were just hanging on." At one point, an anonymous seminary friend slid some cash under their door in an envelope. When seminary students are giving you money... Yikes!

Mac graduated in May of 1971, and in June we moved to Valdosta for him to begin his first job after seminary. And 47 years later, he is still there.

In my father's 56 years as a minister, the demographics of the south have changed dramatically. As industry and wealth have shifted south, and our population has grown, our standard of living has risen greatly. Whereas most southern Christians used to be poor or at least relatively close to it, many now are quite affluent. And now we *often* view the poor with disdain. And when we *do* help them, it is often out of a sense of noblesse oblige, where we are not just helping those who are less fortunate than us, but those who are somehow *less than us*.

Jesus said in Luke 4:18, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." James 2:5 declares that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. The poor, like us, are made in his image. The poor, like us, have diverse gifts and talents. They have the capacity for blessing us in ways we could never imagine.

Looking through the stack of letters that my father received at his retirement, I was moved by the many stories and experiences that were shared. Reading those letters, I could not help but think of that barefoot, 12-year-old boy, who could not read, going

commando in his overalls, running all over Sand Mountain. How in the world did *he* end up *there*, having touched so many lives?

He ended up there through the financial gifts of many people, gifts great and small, that supported the work of the Alabama Baptist Children's home. Such gifts are important, but you will never break the cycle of poverty just by writing checks. **If you want to break the cycle of poverty, you have to break some alabaster jars.** It requires people who are willing to lavishly and extravagantly pour out themselves for the sake of others, even when it seems a waste to some.

It takes people like Mrs. Brown, someone not willing to write off a 12-year-old kid who can't read as dumb or lazy. It takes people like Fat Daddy and Maggie McGee, who were willing to give up the American dream of a nice house in the suburbs or a house on the lake, and trade their empty nest for a nest *full* of 24 boys. Many people showed up for Mac, providing him with stable, healthy relationships.

Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you... and you can show kindness to them whenever you want." Anytime you want... Really! *Any time...* The poor you will always have with you... Sometimes, one of them might even be your pastor.

In our current preaching series, we are focusing on abundance. I could certainly talk about the abundance my family has experienced now for three generations as a result of the love shown to my father by people like Maggie McGee. Instead, I will close with an image of the abundance God poured out on her.

In my Greek Readings class on Matthew, we were reading chapter 19 on Wednesday. It tells of the rich young man who goes away grieving because he had many possessions. Peter later asks, "We have left everything and followed you. What are we going to get?" Jesus tells them that they, like the Son of Man, will sit on thrones and judge the tribes of Israel. Essentially, as brothers and sisters of Jesus, they are royal, and they will all share in the kingdom. And then Jesus says in Matthew 19:29, "And

everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.”

A hundredfold... There is nothing wrong with preaching a prosperity gospel, as long as you have an appropriate understanding of what prosperity actually looks like. What does a hundredfold look like? I told the class that I was reminded of the very last time I saw Momma McGee. We went to visit her at her house in Montgomery, Alabama on Christmas day. When we pulled up, there was nowhere to park. The street was full of cars, and people were parking in the yard. I asked my Dad what was going on, and he told me that those cars belonged to men who were once boys just like him, who came through the Children's Home in the 1950s and 60s. These men were there to visit their mother too, bringing the world's largest parade of grand children with them. Lives forever changed by someone who was willing to break her own alabaster jar and pour herself out in love... lavishly and extravagantly. May we all experience abundance like that. Amen.

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