

***Entering the Passion of Jesus***  
***“The First Dinner: Risking Rejection”***

[Mark 14:3-9](#)

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John record two dinners of Jesus during his final week, and today’s scripture reading records something that happened at the first dinner. Matthew and Mark’s versions are almost identical, but John’s version (12:1-8) has some different elements. John says the first dinner was at the home of three siblings — Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. But, both Mark and Matthew say it was at the home of Simon, a man who had suffered from leprosy. According to John, it was Mary who anointed Jesus’ feet; but, as you may have noticed in our reading, Mark does not give us the woman’s name, and he says she anointed Jesus’ head.

Though none of the three Gospels says so, some people assume that the woman in the story was a sinner and remember her as being Mary Magdalene. Why? Well, it might have something to do with the version of the story recorded in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 7:36-50). There, the dinner and anointing do not happen during Jesus’ final week but months earlier. In that story, Luke calls the woman a sinner. And, in the next chapter, he talks about Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons had been cast out (8:1-3). Over the years, Mary Magdalene has become the name associated with this woman who anointed Jesus — as well as being confused as the woman who was caught in adultery, which is why she is often described as having been a prostitute!

In Mark’s version of the story, the unnamed, and perhaps, uninvited, woman comes into the room full of men with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfumed oil. It was quite an unusual scene in Jesus’ time because women were not allowed to mingle with men in the same room. She breaks the jar, and risking insult, humiliation, and rejection from the men gathered in the room, anoints Jesus’ head with the oil.

Of course, people who are at the table with Jesus complain about her extravagant display. They were angry and rebuked her harshly because they thought what she did was very wasteful. In fact, the oil she poured on Jesus’ head was worth a year’s wages for a common laborer. No wonder they were not happy and even became angry about what she did. But, Jesus defended her and her action, saying that it was a good service that she had done for him, preparing him for his burial. Then, he said, “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed, in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

By this time, Jesus had repeatedly told his disciples about the suffering and death he would have to endure — three times in fact. But, none of them had heard his message. None of them had taken it seriously. But, this unnamed woman believed him and performed this symbolic ritual for him, risking the misunderstanding and rejection of others. In her book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine writes, “This is an opening for us to talk not only about this one unnamed woman, but about all those women in the Gospels whose stories are not remembered and not told.” And she lists the many women who were among the followers of Jesus.

Because while we sometimes forget, women were among the most faithful followers of Jesus. There was Anna, the widow in Jerusalem Temple, Mary Magdalene, the mother of James and John, Joanna and Susanna, Mary and Martha, the women who wept for Jesus and whom Jesus called the daughters of Jerusalem, many women whom Jesus healed, the women who watched Jesus' crucifixion and came to his tomb to anoint him. Like Mary and Martha, some of them owned their own property and had access to their own money. They traveled with Jesus and served as supporters of his grassroots movement. It is highly likely that the unnamed woman in today's text was one of those women followers of Jesus.

Levine asks, "When we tell the story of the Passion of [Jesus], do we remember to tell the story of the anointing woman whose identity has been lost? Jesus himself calls for her remembrance. He is telling us that when we tell his story, we must tell her story as well. And today, when the stories are told, we are the ones telling the stories. And more, those stories need to do more than convey information: they should motivate and inspire, console and provide courage."

Then, what are the stories that we need to tell today in this season of Lent, as we remember the suffering and death of Jesus and prepare ourselves for the celebration of his resurrection?

The Coronavirus that continues to spread throughout the world and in the United States seems to have brought out both the worst and best in us. The news media is filled with many stories of the selfish actions of people, some who are acting out of fear of the unknown, and others out of greed, in the midst of the current crisis. But, there are also other kinds of stories, the stories of compassion and care, the stories of courage that lift our spirits and give us hope. And I believe Jesus is calling us to tell such stories in the midst of the growing fear we feel.

So, here are some heartwarming stories that were shared on social media and news outlets that may have escaped your attention.

Jackie wrote: "My elderly neighbor is self-isolating [to keep herself from the Coronavirus]. So, the neighbor kids are playing her a cello concert from her patio."

Taylor wrote: "Our whole Seattle Times staff has been working nonstop all week as the Coronavirus spreads in Washington. But today, a subscriber wrote in and asked if she could send pizzas to the weekend staff. We love our readers and couldn't do this without them."

Rebecca wrote: "I went to the grocery store this afternoon. As I was walking in, I heard a woman yell to me from her car. I walked over and found an elderly woman and her husband. She cracked her window open a bit more and explained to me nearly in tears that they are afraid to go in the store. [They are] Afraid to get sick as they are in their 80's and hear that the novel Coronavirus is affecting older people disproportionately. And that they don't have family around to help them out. Through the crack in the window, she handed me a \$100 bill and a grocery list, and asked if I would be willing to buy her groceries. I bought the groceries and placed them in her trunk and gave her back the change. She told me she had been sitting in the car for nearly 45 min before I had arrived, waiting to ask the right person for help."

Here is a more organized effort made by two college students: Recently, Liam and Simone, students at Yale, started Invisible Hands, a free delivery program for older and other vulnerable people who are unable to shop for themselves during the Coronavirus outbreak. In 72 hours, they had recruited 1,300 volunteers!

By the way, in a recent survey, about 6,000 Americans were asked if they would be willing to go grocery shopping for a neighbor or friend who is at high risk and can't go out. 86 percent of those who were surveyed responded, yes!

We have all heard about the panic buying of toilet paper. It started because of fake news that someone posted on Facebook. Instantly, the run on toilet paper swept across the whole nation of Japan and spread globally, emptying supermarket shelves everywhere. But did you hear about Trevelino/Keller, an Atlanta-based marketing firm, which decided to give away for free all of the toilet paper in the company's storage unit, since they were shutting down during the quarantine? Its 1,000 employees are now having a great time, distributing the company's toilet paper to the residents of their community through their Toilet Paper Exchange program.

As you know, medical professionals are working hard at the frontlines of the battle with the Coronavirus, putting themselves at risk through exposure and exhaustion while helping those who are sick. Last Tuesday, New York City issued a plea to retired and private practice doctors and nurses to help with the fight against the Coronavirus. In one day, 1,000 people came forward to join the 9,000 medical professionals who were already registered with the city's Department of Health as part of the Medical Reserve Corps to help treat COVID-19 patients.

In partnership with Nebraska Medicine and several other local businesses, the staff of Metropolitan Community College in Nebraska are making plastic face shields for doctors, nurses, and staff at the hospital to protect them from contracting the Coronavirus while treating their patients.

Recently, Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, went to the public about the shortage of protective face masks for its medical staff. Volunteer seamstresses quickly stepped up to help, and they are now working closely with the hospital to make masks that can be properly and safely used. Laura, one of the volunteers said, "It's heartwarming to be part of this community initiative that's drawing volunteer seamstresses from all over eastern Iowa. Already, so many volunteers have contacted us and are making the masks. We anticipate having 1,000 available for use by early next week."

With the rapid rise of the number of Coronavirus patients in the ICU, ventilators are in great demand because it is an essential piece of equipment used for treatment in the most severe cases. In response, Gui in Ireland started the Open Source Ventilator Project on Facebook a few days ago, and it has already attracted over 300 doctors, nurses, engineers, designers, tech founders and others across the nation of Ireland and around the world. Their goal is to build a ventilator using readily available materials, 3D printing and open source hardware resources. Within a week, they have already built a prototype that can be a solution to the global ventilator shortage problem.

Twice this past week, here on our church campus, we have had Second Harvest Food Bank volunteers who distributed prepackaged boxes of food for those in our community who are food insecure. With

the rising demand caused by the sudden economic downturn, they are bravely stepping up to help with this essential service.

I could go on and on, sharing with you the countless examples of people putting themselves at risk, putting themselves on the line, putting all of their talents and gifts to work in service of others. These are the stories of light which shine in the growing darkness of fear and panic. These are the stories that we must remind ourselves to lift up and share.

What are the stories you are sharing these days? What are the stories you are telling yourself in the midst of these troubling times? And what are the stories you are creating?

Because there are voices in the community crying out in need. Recently, the Santa Clara County hospitals sent out a plea for help, wondering if there are members in the community who could donate medical supplies. Might this be an opportunity for us to meet the cry of our neighbors as a church?

Friends, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, would you join me this week in asking how we might create stories worth sharing? Stories of courage in the midst of fearful circumstances; stories of great compassion and care in the midst of grief and despair; stories like the ones we shared today. Stories like the story of the unnamed woman who risked it all to serve the Lord. A story which motivates and inspires us, a story Jesus reminds us to tell as part of his story, wherever the Good News is proclaimed! By God's grace, may our stories be worthy of sharing! May they remind all those who hear the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.