

“Grace”  
Mark 14:1-11  
March 18, 2018  
First United Methodist Church, Baraboo  
Pastor Marianne Cotter

During Lent we’ve been celebrating the springtime of the soul, exploring things we want to grow in our lives of faith . The virtues we’ve looked at – humility, gratitude, wisdom – and the ones we’ll explore as we move into Holy Week -- justice, forgiveness and faith – are all qualities of God. Because we are made in the image of God, we are reflect God back to others and that’s what virtues are. We can reflect back grace to others.

Most lists of Christian virtues don’t include grace. But grace is a quality of God. Grace is a gift we do not deserve, nor can we ever earn or deserve it. Grace points to the unfathomable generosity of God in offering this gift. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) We are freed from proving we’re worthy of God’s love and we are humbled knowing that despite all our great qualities, that’s not why God loves us. That’s not why Christ saves us. It’s all because of grace.

There’s a little chant I sometimes do with my grand daughter Amelia: we are great we are great, we are great, Yahhhhhhhh!” We are great. And we also mess up. Last week at SPIRIT night our table tent (conversation topic) was: name a mistake you made today. After your tablemate share his/her that mistake, say “It’s OK. We all mess up sometimes.” In the words of Romans 3:23 “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

An awareness of grace is closely tied to an awareness of sin. Sin is our human tendency to mess things up in a serious way: mess up our relationships – with others, with God, others and the earth are closely tied. If you don’t know how much you need it, amazing grace will never be yours. if you have no awareness of how you’ve messed up, you can’t understand grace. That’s if you can ever really understand grace for there’s always something unfathomable about it, that defies explanation.

Our church’s mission is to “help people ‘say yes’ to God.” When we ‘say yes’ to God we say yes to this undeserved gift of forgiveness, acceptance, unconditional love offered to us by God. We say “yes” to grace. Once we do, then all other virtues become possible. All our efforts to do good begin with receiving the gift of grace .

So, let’s look at the story of the anointing of Jesus as a story about grace. There are four versions of the story of the anointing of Jesus in the gospels. In Matthew and Mark the story is part of the passion narrative – the last week of Jesus’ life. In Luke 7 a nameless woman, a known sinner anoints Jesus’ feet and finds forgiveness. In

John 12 Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anoints Jesus. This unnamed woman in Mark's gospel is not a sinful woman, nor is she Mary Magdalene as people sometimes believe.

She was probably another guest at the home of Simon the Leper where Jesus was also staying; or a woman of the household. Most likely, she was pretty wealthy. She had an entire alabaster jar of nard. Nard or spikenard was an essential oil made from a plant that grew in India. Nard was used for medicinal purposes. It was used in rituals to crown kings. Nard was used to perfume hair. And it was used to prepare peoples' bodies for burial. Nard was very, very expensive. The amount of nard she had represented a year's salary for a day laborer.

When anointing a body for burial, or using nard to perfume someone's hair or head, a few drops of nard was all that would be needed. But this woman pours out the entire contents. "a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head." Mark 14:3 The disciples' response was judgment and condemnation. "What a waste!" They say. "This could have been sold and the money given to the poor." Jesus defends her. "But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. <sup>7</sup>For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup>She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial."

Just as God lavishes upon us the gift of undeserved and unconditional love, this woman lavishes fragrant oil on Jesus' head. A few drops would have been enough yet she gives in abundance, generously, beyond what is expected. "You can't out give God" Mike, a farmer from Waterloo, Wisconsin would remind me after church. "God just keeps on giving and giving," Mike would say. This unnamed woman reflects God's kind of generosity. She gave all she had to the one who would soon give his life for her. Her lavish generosity reflects the grace of God.

In Mark 14 verses 6 and 8 we read But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ....She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.' Jesus says She has performed a **good** service for me. The Greek word is *kalos*. It means beautiful, good, worthy. Like in Matthew 5:16 where Jesus says "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. " What was so good about what she did? Remember, none of the disciples recognized or admitted that Jesus was soon going to die. Here it is on the evening that he will be arrested and they still didn't get it. The Disciples only wanted to see him as strong, like a powerful messiah; not frail, not mortal. As death approaches, he needed someone to see him as he really was: to acknowledge the truth of what was happening. What's beautiful and good is that she saw the truth that Jesus was about to face death. It was beautiful that she met him where he was:

in his human condition; weak, vulnerable. To allow her to touch him, minister to him in this way was to admit his need.

And it was beautiful and good because she did what she could. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the many problems facing our world; we may feel guilty at not solving every one of them. We forget that God asks us only to do what we can. “ I have a gift and I want to offer it – when I can.” Those words were spoken by a young woman, an accountant by profession, who also happened to have bi-polar illness. She had a wonderful boss, who knew there would be periods when she needed time off – time to readjust medications, times when her illness made it hard to concentrate. She was determined not to give up her job despite these periods when she needed to step away from it. She knew her need and she experienced grace in her life too.

Recently I heard a remarkable person who did a beautiful thing for a group of about thirty of us whose lives have been touched by mental illness. His name is Chris Keenan. Have I told you his story, of becoming strong through meeting the challenges of mental illness? Chris Keenan works for the Wisconsin Dept. of Health, analyzing data on mental illness. But his most important work might be the speaking he does – for groups like the Sauk County chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. He does what he can – to end the stigma around mental health. He told his story to the thirty of us in the room that night of dealing with anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress after enduring the tragic death of his father, the criminal trial that followed. He spoke of being the primary caretaker for His mother suffers from bi-polar illness – bringing her to Wisconsin and finding care for her. He spoke of his brother’s severe mental illness and the pain brought. And how handling all that became too much. Yet he got help. He has survived and become strong with a gentle kind of strength. And he tells us of things that keep him healthy now – like things like getting exercise and meditating. He was quiet, humble, articulate and empathetic person. He knew there were things he could not do for himself, and needed help. Listening to Chris, everyone in that room was very much aware of our need. Like that unnamed woman who met Jesus in his need, Chris Keenan met all of us in that room in our need: acknowledged the truth of our lives. His words and presence touching us in a gentle and healing way. He was able to do all that by the grace of God.

We are like Chris Keenan. The good, and beautiful things we can do are possible by the grace of God. As we sang this morning “Every promise we can make Every prayer and step of faith Every difference we will make is only by His grace.” To keep on doing beautiful things is a matter of never straying too far from knowing our need. And that is why after the offering we will sing “Just as I Am.”

This hymn was written by a woman who was very much aware of her need. She lived with chronic illness much of her adult life and her name was Charlotte Elliott. In 1834, she wrote the hymn while living with her brother, a pastor. The church was having a fund raiser for a charity school and everyone was busy making things for

the church bazaar, leaving Charlotte alone and feeling worthless and lonely. But then she remembered the message from a pastor friend who told her “come to Christ just as you are.” she overcame her distress. She planted herself again in the hope she had, and wrote. In the words of Irene Ting-Ting Lai, a Methodist from Malaysia, “Just as I am with one plea” ..... is a reminder that people aren’t “good enough” or “not good enough” to come to Jesus. It is through God’s initiative, pardon, promises and free love mentioned through the hymn that everyone can come to Jesus. Just like Charlotte Elliott people will face “conflict” “doubt” “fighting and fears within and without”. But one can find rest in Jesus.” That is grace.

Today we remember and honor the woman about whom Jesus spoke when 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 Gods grace, we are able to do good and beautiful things too. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our LORD Jesus Christ. Amen.