

“Misjudging Eyes”

Mark 14:1–9

Our Lenten series is entitled “Eyes on Jesus.” Tonight on Ash Wednesday, imagine if you get ashes in your eyes, you can’t see clearly. Our inborn sinfulness is like ashes to our spiritual vision. We look at what is good and distort its purpose, or we look upon what is beautiful and misjudge its value.

Jesus says, “When you give to the needy” (Mt. 6:2), so He assumes that Christians will do this, and since He would never want us to do something bad, then giving to the needy must be a good thing to do. Jesus also says in the Passion Reading, “You always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them” (Mark 14:7). But sinners misjudge the purpose of such good deeds.

Jesus criticized the hypocrites “in the synagogues and in the streets” for conspicuously giving to the needy in order to “be praised by others” (Matthew 6:2). Likewise, they prayed long-winded prayers and made a show of fasting in order to “be seen by others” (Matthew 6:5, 16). In being praised and seen by others, they received the rewards they were seeking: to be held in high esteem by other people. This is an entirely self-serving and godless approach to good works, because it pays no thought to our Father in heaven.

On the other hand, those who come to the Father through faith in His Son view good works as opportunities to serve the neighbor and please God (2 Cor. 5:9). In fact, they aren’t even seeking a reward. Jesus never says that rewards are why

Christians do what they do. He promises that the Father will reward the almsgiving, prayer, and fasting of His children, but reward is not to be our motivation.

But our Old Adam misjudges this point. Sin's deep delusion is that good works must be done in order to be rewarded with eternal life. That is the worst misjudgment we can make. Thanks be to God that here on Ash Wednesday, His Word, along with the liturgy and hymns, makes painfully clear our utter wretchedness and desperate need for the forgiveness of our sins. What we need most isn't to give to the needy or do any other good work (even though this is good and pleasing in the eyes of Jesus). We need Jesus, the Lamb of God, to take away our sins. And St. Mark takes us to Him in our Passion Reading when he begins, "It was now two days before the Passover. . . . And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest Him by stealth and kill Him" (Mark 14:1).

The Passover and Passion were just a couple of days away. Jesus knew this and had repeatedly told His disciples that His death was drawing near. But unlike Jesus, the guests at Simon's dinner party didn't have their mind on the cross when an uninvited woman barged in, broke open a jar of perfume, and dumped it on Jesus' head. And I don't picture her slowly and gently pouring it on Jesus' head but drenching Him, possibly leaving Him blinking to squeeze out the drops falling into His eyes.

Then there's the value of the ointment. If it really could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, that would be roughly a year's wages for a day laborer. In today's money, this is in the neighborhood of at least \$30-40,000. Before the feeding of the five thousand men plus the women and children, the disciples estimated that two hundred denarii worth of bread would fill the crowd's bellies (Mark 6:37). Just imagine how many people you could feed with three hundred denarii! That's what the guests at Simon's dinner were saying among themselves,

outraged at the woman's wastefulness, indignant that so many would go hungry because of her impulsiveness. "What's wrong with you, woman? Are you out of your mind? You should have sold that perfume and given the money to the poor!" But they had misjudging eyes.

Jesus, however, always sees clearly. He comes to the woman's defense and tells her critics to back off. Jesus recognizes her clumsy, unceremonious, impulsive action as a beautiful work, as preparation for the most beautiful, noble, good deed in human history: His suffering, death, and burial.

It is good to give to the needy, to do good to the poor. But when the incarnate Son of God is sitting at your table preparing to suffer and die for the sin of the world in a couple of days and then be hastily entombed without proper anointing at His burial, then three hundred denarii worth of ointment is no waste but is rightly devoted to His service.

What the dinner guests could not see was the sheer uniqueness, the tremendous weight, of the moment they were witnessing. For God's Anointed One—that's what Christ and Messiah mean—His purpose was to give His body and shed His blood, to be the once-for-all Passover Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This moment was not business as usual. I'm sure that God the Father generously found other ways for the alms necessary to feed the poor of Bethany and Jerusalem on that day, even as He was about to pour out the priceless blood of His beloved Son as a saving, healing ointment for sinners. And the Son of God went to the cross willingly.

What an aroma that perfume must have made in the house! Like the way the Easter lilies fill our sanctuary with the smell of resurrection. In just a few days, Jesus would be hanging on a cross. As the sweat and blood poured down Jesus' face, could He still smell the perfume that had prepared Him for burial? It would have

been fitting, for, as St. Paul writes in Ephesians 5, “Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

And, in Holy Baptism, you have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and anointed with the Holy Spirit to sanctify you and make you pleasing to the Father. The beautiful robe of Christ’s righteousness has become yours. The power of sin, death, and Satan has been shattered like that broken alabaster flask, and you have been liberated from the realm of darkness to live forever in the Kingdom of Light and Life, and for the rest of your earthly days to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself.

That’s what the unnamed woman was doing, and her motivation has to have been faith in Jesus and love for Him, since Jesus solemnly states, “Truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Mark 14:9). She was an integral part of the Gospel story being fulfilled, and the Gospel is always about the forgiveness of sins being received in faith.

Why doesn’t Mark give us this woman’s name? Because at that moment, she was not the point—this is about Jesus. Her anonymity also teaches us about how to approach good works. “She has done what she could,” Jesus says. That is, she simply lived out her vocation, and on that day, she was called to do the beautiful work of anointing Jesus beforehand for His burial. She did not do it to be praised or seen by others, nor was she seeking a reward, but she had eyes only for Jesus. And now, even though as a sinner she was not worthy of anything from the Father, she has gone on to receive her eternal reward, all for the sake of the One whom she anointed – the Anointed One Himself, Jesus of Nazareth, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.