



Renegade Gospel: The Rebel Jesus
“SHE DID WHAT SHE COULD”

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Scripture: Mark 14:1-9

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.” While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, 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. But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 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. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 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.”

Prayer Song

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.*

I don't think he knew who I was. I was one of those women who were fascinated by Jesus, followed him from afar and, at times, provided financial support. A similar story is told in all four of your gospels, but it's in Matthew and here in Mark where I remain nameless. I have no need to be recognized or honored. I just wanted to do what I could.

It was during Passover week, what you call Holy Week. A few days before, Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem, with people throwing palm branches in his path and shouting, “Hosanna to the son of David!” You call it Palm Sunday. Like thousands of others, they were in town for the Passover and heard about this man, Jesus, a man who healed, cast out demons, and cared for outcasts. Waving their first century pompoms, the Jews were totally caught up in the

excitement. But many of them probably didn't even know why they were shouting. And the ones who did know Jesus were just as much in the dark because they had the mistaken notion that this man was going to overthrow Rome and bring political freedom to the Jews.

Waving palm branches and spreading their garments on the road was traditionally done for famous military or civic leaders. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" they shouted. What the crowd didn't notice was that this was a different kind of parade. Jesus chose to ride on a donkey, not a horse. A donkey was a symbol of peace, whereas horses were symbols of military might.

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd were threatened by what was going on and said to Jesus, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." Jesus answered, "I tell you, if they were silent, the very stones would cry out." I heard it. But then Jesus stopped right along the parade route and wept over Jerusalem. I think Jesus knew in his heart that this was no real parade. Jesus may have been king for a day, but soon he would be a criminal on a cross. When the guest of honor at this so-called parade looked out from the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley to the temple mount, he cried.

Jesus wept because he understood the tragedy of that moment. For whom were they cheering, anyway? He was just a man riding a donkey who would be dead in less than a week. Jesus realized that behind those waving palm branches were people who had no conception of the things that make for peace. They were mindlessly joining in the celebration of the moment, caught up in a mob mentality which in just a few days would turn from "Hosanna!" to "Crucify him!"

I had a bad feeling about the whole thing, and I wanted to protect Jesus as much as I could. During the day that week, Jesus taught in the temple in Jerusalem, and at night he was able to unwind with his best friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus in nearby Bethany. That's where I lived as well. I followed Jesus from afar that week. I couldn't stay away, for I had come to love this gentle man who modeled God's amazing love for all people. At the same time he could call people out, driving away those who were cheating the poor by buying and selling in the temple, insisting that the temple be a house of prayer.

The chief priests, scribes and elders challenged Jesus' authority all week. It's clear they were looking for a way to arrest him. But Jesus kept them on their toes! When they asked whether Jews should pay taxes to the emperor, Jesus asked them to bring him a coin. "Whose head is on the coin?" he asked. "The emperor's." "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's. Gotcha!"

I saw Jesus one day watching people put their money into the treasury in the temple. When a poor widow put two copper coins into the treasury, he said in front of everyone, "Truly this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury, for the rest of you are putting in money out of your abundance. Out of her poverty, she put in everything she had to live on." The scribes and Pharisees were totally embarrassed – and furious!

Now it was two days before the Passover. On the one hand, the chief priests and scribes were seeking to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. On the other hand, Judas, one of Jesus' disciples,

was also looking to betray Jesus for his own gain. In hindsight, I could see that they were in cahoots. All I know is that I felt compelled to do something for Jesus.

On this particular night, Jesus was back in Bethany. All he wanted was to eat a good meal and spend time with his friends. So he went to a dinner party at the home of Simon the leper. Simon, of course, did not have leprosy at the time. I saw everyone gathering. They were all men. Then I just did it.

While they were reclining at the table, I entered Simon's house and approached Jesus with an alabaster jar of very costly nard, which is made from the root of a plant that grows along the Ganges River in India. At the time it was the custom for a woman to sprinkle a drop or two of perfume over the head of a guest to welcome and give honor to a person entering her home. But perfumes and spices had another purpose at the time, and that was to anoint a body for burial.

The nard that I had, however, was sealed in a family heirloom jar that had been passed down to me from my mother. It wasn't like a bottle of perfume with a lid that could be taken off, a few drops used, and then resealed for later use. It had taken me years to save up this ointment, yet something in my heart told me to go for it.

Jesus didn't even know me. And this wasn't my home. I was crashing the party, but I was certain what I was doing. I came right up to him at dinner and lavishly broke the jar and poured all of the expensive oil on his head. I was filled with love for him, and I was told later that the fragrance of the perfume filled the room for days.

Some of the men around the table were angry. They objected to the gift and even accused me of being a renegade. They didn't understand that I was giving pure love – even when it was costly for me to do so. But Jesus understood. And, like with all gifts of love, the timing was perfect. I was anointing Jesus in preparation for his burial just a few days later. I could sense that Jesus was vulnerable and needed that gift of love right then to sustain him through what was coming, just like each one of you can go out and face anything because of the love that God has lavished on you!

Naturally, the men didn't get it. "Jealousy was in the air when a poor woman's generosity became an embarrassment to their tight-fistedness." (*Stages on the Way*, Wild Goose Publications) So they scolded me and said, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor." I understand why some of the men objected to the gift. Three hundred denarii was enough for a day laborer and his family to live on for a year.

Would you pour a \$25,000 jar of perfume on Jesus' head, or anyone else's head, for that matter? Remember, too, that on the eve of Passover, there was a tradition of giving money to the poor. My anointing now made that impossible.

How painful it must have been for Jesus to realize that these men, some of whom he had lived with and taught for three years, didn't understand his own words about his death whereas I

understood without any instruction. How agonizing to admit that unlike his own disciples, I was the one who recognized that Jesus, facing his passion, was the one most in need of compassion.

I'll never forget how Jesus pleaded with the men, "Please let her alone. Just this once, let her look after me because my time is running out. Don't you see? Tomorrow is too late. Tomorrow there will be no more opportunity for compassion and love. You always have the poor with you. You can show kindness to them whenever you wish, and you need to show kindness to the poor.

"To give to the poor is right. But you won't always have me. She did what she could – she anointed my body for burial. Yes, it may defy common sense, and it may break all the rules. It may not be prudent or economical. But there will be nothing prudent or economical about my death, either. Her anointing is what I need. She is preparing my body for death. The beauty of her extravagant love is more important at this moment than anything you could do for the poor. Besides, sometimes the best thing you can do for the poor is accept their gifts to you."

If my story is ever told, it's not because of me. I don't even have a name. It's because my story teaches a truth not found anywhere else in scripture: there is a place for extravagance. There is a recklessness to love that refuses to count the cost. Love sees that at times there is only one chance in life to do something really fine.

There is a place for a love so crazy and generous and deep that what we give can never be repaid or matched. But what I did for Jesus does not lessen in any sense your obligation to the poor. It's just that in this case, giving to the poor was not the appropriate response. What Jesus needed was for me to give all I had to him, to do what I could.

By honoring my humble gift, Jesus proclaims that he is on the side of all those who release their gifts to be used in this world. Jesus is on the side of painters, sculptors and potters, whose art gives you beauty. Jesus is on the side of composers and performers, whose music inspires you to higher things. Jesus is on the side of writers, dramatists and poets, whose words connect you with God and each other.

Jesus is on the side of those who stop to smell the flowers, watch a sunset, walk along the beach, send a card, give a hug or say a prayer. Jesus is on the side of those who refuse to live under the tyranny of law and "oughts" and "shoulds" but do everything they can to bring grace to our world. Jesus is on the side of those who know that sometimes the right thing is to throw caution to the wind and love with reckless abandon.

Jesus told those who were at the dinner party that night, "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." This last sentence in this story is perhaps the most important. Jesus claimed that my action is critical to the unfolding of the gospel itself and is to be told as part of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Could it be that the gospel is not truly or completely proclaimed unless you tell what I have done? Could it be that the breaking of bread in memory of Jesus is paralleled by the crossing of boundaries and the breaking of a jar and the pouring of ointment in memory of me? Could it be

that my action at a supper and Jesus' actions at a last supper are both vital elements of the gospel story?

How are you telling my story of extravagant love by your words and your deeds? After all, I simply did what I could. I gave what I had to my Lord.

Prayer Song:
"I Will Give What I Have"
(*Enemy of Apathy*, Iona Community)