

“Poured Out for Many”

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14 • Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 • 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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Maundy Thursday

It began on Palm Sunday. It continues now, as we gather to remember our Lord’s last meal with his chosen few. It will continue tomorrow, when we remember Jesus pouring out his body for all of us.

The precipitating event takes place in the village of Bethany, just over the crest of the Mount of Olives, not far from Jerusalem. This is where Jesus has been staying while visiting Jerusalem. He receives an invitation to dinner at the home of a man named Simon. The Gospel writers call him “Simon the leper.” He had a skin disease that rendered him “unclean” according to the traditional Jewish ceremonial laws. He had to live his life separated from his community. Many people assumed that his disease was God’s punishment for his sins. He was unwanted, unloved. An outcast. A pariah.

Jesus showed him that he was wanted. Jesus showed him that he was loved. Such is the way of Jesus. Those whom society casts out, those whom society looks down upon, those whom many righteous believers render as “less than,” Jesus welcomes and loves. The church, when it is faithful, does the same.

There was a woman at the dinner. In Mark’s gospel, she is unidentified, nameless. Some people think it was Mary, the sister of Martha. Others think it was Mary Magdalene. Mark does not record her name, but he does record what she does. She takes an ornate pottery jar, containing an extraordinarily expensive perfume, and breaks it open. She takes the expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus’s head.

For Judas Iscariot, this was the final straw. He had seen and heard enough. Whatever passion and devotion he had once felt for Jesus had melted away. Poor soul, he couldn’t reconcile the *grace* of Jesus Christ with his own sense of what was *right* and what was *wrong*. In his mind, wasting that perfume was *wrong*. The perfume could have been sold, and the money given to the poor. It was a noble thought. Jesus does want us to remember the poor. But more than that ... he wants us to honor and follow *him*. He defends the woman’s actions. “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.”

Jesus had been trying to prepare his followers for the reality that he was about to die. He had told them, several times. Perhaps the woman sensed it. Perhaps she knew this was her last opportunity to perform an act of kindness for Jesus. Anointing his body, whether she knew it or not, for his burial.

Judas meets with the chief priests. He is willing to betray Jesus. They are willing to give him money. So much for his nobility. His act of faithlessness is as important as the woman’s act of faith.

A short time passes. The first day of Unleavened Bread is at hand. Passover begins at sundown. It's a festive celebration, a joyful remembrance for the Jewish people of God's faithful deliverance centuries earlier. It's a time to gather with friends and family, sharing a meal, remembering, praying.

Jesus and his friends gather in Jerusalem. They have a place where they can eat the meal, an "upper room," somebody's second-story home, somebody with a large enough space to seat them all. They enter, Jesus and all twelve of his hand-picked disciples; they take their places; they eat the meal.

Normally it would have been a time for celebrating. Most Jewish homes were feasting and rejoicing. Jesus changes the mood. "One of you will betray me," he says. "One who is eating with me." They protest. "Surely not *me*?" "Yes, one of you," says Jesus; "one who is dipping bread into this bowl with me. Woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!" The celebratory mood is shattered.

Then, to make it perfectly clear to them, he takes what is there in front of him, and turns it into symbols of his coming death. The bread, representing his body, which he breaks in front of them, just as his body would be broken in front of many people the very next day. The cup of wine, representing his blood, which he pours out in front of them, just as his blood would be poured out the very next day.

As if *that* wasn't plain enough, he says one thing more: "I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." This is it. His final, very last, supper. There will be no more. He will not eat or drink again. Not before he dies. Not in *this* life.

And so we remember. Year after year, we gather to remember, as he directed us, recalling that Last Supper, but even more importantly, remembering what that supper *symbolizes*. His body, broken *for you*. His blood, shed *for you*. To forgive you and cleanse you from all your sins. Whatever you've done in your life that has hurt others or disappointed God, *it ends here*. Jesus wipes it all *clean*.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God for Christ's faithfulness and for our redemption. Thanks be to God for the loving, welcoming, embracing, forgiving, magnificent, wonderful *grace* of God.

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