

March 29th: Anointing At The Table

Welcome once again to our Lenten series, At The Table–this is a time of year when Christians around the globe focus on spiritual renewal, repentance, and growing in our faith. This year, we’re not asking you to give up anything–we’re asking you to consider adding something to your life. That could be daily prayer, weekly devotions, trying a new form of community service, or whatever else adds fresh insight and depth to your journey. One powerful thing that you can add to your routines is more time at the table–more time with family and friends gathered around food you love and love to share.

Let’s take a deep breath, and begin our time of reflection with prayer.

Anointed Jesus, you invite us to share in this special table, a place where you enjoy fellowship and conversation in your final days. You invite us here, and we are now in your presence. As we draw close to you, speak to us through the words of this brave woman, and may we also be empowered to proclaim your gospel in our world. Amen.

In the fall of 1968, New York state legislator, teacher, and community activist Shirley Chisholm became the first black woman elected to the United States Congress. A few years later, she served as the founding member of both the Congressional Black Caucus and the National Women’s Political Caucus, cementing her status as a visionary leader and civic pioneer. By 1972, she announced a bid for president, and became the first African American to enter the Democratic Party’s presidential primary. Although she didn’t win, her campaign was a pivotal step in advancing nationwide progressive policies–her speeches highlighted systemic issues affecting lower income and marginalized Americans, and advocated for worker protections, healthcare coverage for uninsured citizens, land rights for native tribes, the Equal Rights Amendment, and federal funding for child care. Later in her career, she was known for opposing American involvement in the Vietnam War, the military draft, and the inhumane treatment of Haitian refugees. In many ways, her public service laid the foundation for many services and realities that we take for

granted—she fought for these rights and benefits that now seem so commonplace and essential.

However, it wasn't easy. Everywhere Shirley Chisholm went, she encountered obstacles and discrimination. She faced harsh criticism from her male colleagues, other African American leaders, and her political opponents, and was often the only black person or woman in the room. As a vocal supporter of the women's movement, she even critiqued some of the other leaders of second wave feminism—which disproportionately focused on the concerns and needs of middle class, white women—and argued for the inclusion of women of color in these cultural and economic conversations. At many points, she had few allies, and even more limited funds.

And still, she persevered. Her legacy includes one of her most famous statements: “If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”

I was thinking about that quote this week when I was meditating on today's passage—because the woman in our story arrives at this particular table and encounters some hostility from people who think she doesn't belong there. Despite this, she brings her own metaphorical folding chair and she claims her space in a beautiful and memorable way. We'll get to more about that in a minute.

But first, let's remind ourselves about some liturgical and historical context. Today is Palm Sunday, the day when Christians around the globe mark the beginning of Holy Week, Jesus' last week of life. It's true that most Palm Sunday services focus on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem—it's an important enough moment that all four Gospels include in their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. But today we're looking at what comes after that journey into town. What happens after Jesus is welcomed to the city like a conquering king? Where does he go and what does he do in the days between this moment and his death?

Well, you may remember from Pastor Heather's children's moment about the origins of Passover, that it was and still is an annual event. Every single year, Jews from around the region made their way to the homes of friends and family, and they settled in for at least a full week of gatherings, worship at the temple, and other important rituals. Being together reminded them of that first Passover meal and the protection that God offered to them when they were enslaved in Egypt. Every time they ate and retold the story, it helped them honor their sacred commitment to the God that rescued them. Like other observant Jews, Jesus and his disciples set aside this time to focus on their faith, choosing to spend these days at the table.

The events of Mark 14 are happening two days before the Passover feast, and Jesus is with friends in the suburb of Bethany. This passage starts with Jesus visiting the home of a man named Simon the Leper—he's invited to join a small group of people for a preparatory meal. That means that all participants are getting ready for the celebration that is coming—these are the high holy days when families, neighbors, and clans are logistically and spiritually focused on these events. It was probably all anyone could talk about—the lambs that were being chosen for sacrifice, who was bringing what bread or side dish to the party, and how the story of this feast compared to their modern day occupation by the Roman Empire.

But something quickly sets this meal apart. Something different happens.

In verse 3, we learn that this table has an unexpected guest—an unnamed woman has decided to join the meal with a singular purpose. She comes into this scene carrying an alabaster jar full of an expensive perfume—our biblical author tells us that it was made of pure nard—an aromatic, golden, essential oil that would have smelled like a dense forest. Just one drop would have been enough to fill an entire room with fragrance, but she chooses to crack the jar open and pour the entire amount on Jesus' head.

I've been to a Sephora store when all the teenagers are in there spraying body mists and perfumes all over each other, and so I know that this must have been

an overwhelming sensory experience. Like, picture this: all of Simon's guests are eating their meal, and suddenly their senses are completely inundated by the scent of this exotic perfume. As you might expect, they respond with anger—not necessarily about the smell, although I'm sure it was potent, but about the display of such a quantity of perfume. They even rebuke her for this act, saying, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor."

It sounds frivolous, right? It sounds downright reckless, doesn't it? A whole year's salary, dumped on Jesus' head in the middle of a dinner party.

If you're doing the math in your head and trying to imagine spending your annual salary on a gift for a person that you don't know very well, that probably sounds a little insane to you, yes? I looked it up, and the most recent data shows that the current average salary in Bremerton is just about \$53,000 per year—can you picture taking that amount of money, buying perfume, and then using it in a single sitting?

Probably not, right? Think of all the things you could do with \$53,000! Think of the bills you could pay, the vacations you could take, the nonprofits you could support!

And yet—Jesus responds differently. Jesus in turn rebukes his companions, telling them, "Leave her alone... Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me." Jesus continues, "She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial."

But what exactly is this beautiful thing that this woman has done for Jesus? What makes this action so special?

Well, in spiritual terms, we call this action "anointing," and it has a rich history in the Bible dating back thousands of years. The first time that our scriptures record this act can be found in Genesis 28, when the patriarch Jacob has a dream while he is sleeping at Bethel. After he awakens from his wondrous

dream of ladders angels, he takes oil and anoints the rock he had been using as a pillow, turning it into a monument in the desert—a reminder of God’s promises. We also see anointing in the story of the Exodus, specifically chapter 30, when Moses anointed his sons, his brother Aaron and the tabernacle while they were traveling in the wilderness—the oil applied to their foreheads and altar makes them set apart and holy. When God’s people reach the promised land of Canaan, and beg for a king like the other nations, God sends the prophet Samuel, first to anoint Saul, and then his successor David—he marks them for the highest level of human leadership.

Later in the Old Testament, biblical authors start to reference “the Anointed One,” the savior and leader that God will send to rescue the world. Scholars and theologians point to the apocalyptic book of Daniel, especially the 9th chapter, where the writer claims the Anointed One will restore and rebuild Jerusalem. Our modern term Messiah actually comes from a Hebrew word meaning “the anointed one,” so whenever Christians refer to Jesus as our Messiah, we remind ourselves that he was marked by oil and divine blessing—he was sent to fulfill these ancient promises.

As a religious practice, anointing was primarily done by men, especially in the patriarchal world of the 1st century Middle East. Women used oils and herbs in burial rites, but it was unusual for them to participate in more ceremonial functions like this—so you can understand why Jesus’ friends were surprised and even a little suspicious of her motives. And Jesus even explains her actions as ones that are preparing him for his death—he interprets this anointing as one that is marking him for his upcoming sacrifice. That is a big part of what’s happening here, but I wonder if that’s what the woman believed she was doing. We don’t get to hear her response—she doesn’t speak at all. We don’t have any explanation from her about why she brings her metaphorical folding chair to this table and uses her resources this way. Maybe she truly believed that anointing Jesus was worth any cost—the act of proclaiming Jesus as her King and Savior was priceless to her, and she was willing to give up whatever it took to get close to him.

Regardless, we do get a special affirmation from Jesus, right at the end of this story. In verse 9, Jesus tells his fellow dinner party guests, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

Jesus basically says, whenever you talk about me, you’re gonna talk about her too! The gospel of Jesus will be spoken about in the same breath as the actions of this bold woman—the one who dared to show up to Jesus’ table and lavished him with her perfume. She’s going to be remembered, just like him. In Jesus’ mind, her actions go hand in hand with his—they are part of the same story, the same good news.

I think this is a powerful lesson for us this week, as we think about the tables we currently occupy and the ones we are too scared to approach. As we reflect on the places and spaces we inhabit and the ones that seem out of our reach, I’d like us to consider how we can put these ideas into practice in our own lives.

Maybe some of us are meant to be like this ancient woman—bravely making room for ourselves in order to fulfill our own callings. Maybe we have our own anointings to perform—our own ways of making things holy and set apart. Maybe we have our own inner purpose of naming and claiming God’s promises. Maybe we’ll be spoken of and remembered for our deep faith and courage the same way that she is. Maybe we have a legacy to build that might seem foolish to others, but is priceless to us.

And maybe some of us are meant to be like Shirley Chisholm—speaking up and speaking out for what we believe in. Maybe we have barriers to break, new visions to cast, fresh perspectives to bring to the table. Maybe we have glass ceilings to smash, paths to pioneers, or causes to champion. Maybe doing those things brings us closer to the good news that Jesus has invited us to share with the world.

So in memory of both these women, I'll leave us with this, in case we need to hear it again: "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

Amen.