

**“Anointed for Sacrifice”**  
**Mark 14:1-11**  
**March 29, 2026**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

It’s Palm Sunday – or Passion Sunday – a Sunday where the Church has historically focused on Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem before holy week, and his sacrifice and suffering on Good Friday.

And it’s that second theme that’s in focus in our text this morning in our series in Mark, as Mark’s attention shifts to Good Friday, the sacrifice Jesus will make on the cross, and its significance for us.

With that in mind, let’s turn to our text: Mark 14:1-11.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

<sup>14:1</sup> It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, <sup>2</sup> for they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.”

<sup>3</sup> And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. <sup>4</sup> There were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment wasted like that? <sup>5</sup> For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” And they scolded her. <sup>6</sup> But Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. <sup>9</sup> And 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.”

<sup>10</sup> Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. <sup>11</sup> And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

## **Prayer of Illumination**

Lord, we ask you this morning  
to give us understanding according to your word.  
Our lips have poured out your praise,  
our tongues have sung of your word,  
because we know that all your commandments are right.  
And so, as we attend now to your word,  
grant us understanding, and be at work in our hearts,  
for Jesus's sake. Amen  
[Based on Psalm 119:169-172]

## **Introduction**

Our text this morning looks forward to Jesus's death and burial. The chief priests and scribes are plotting. Judas has made his decision to betray Jesus.

But in the middle of it all, this woman comes to Jesus, and anoints him. Jesus sees it as an anointing for his burial – for his coming death – and he praises her devotion.

Taken as a whole, what I think we see here is that, because of Jesus's divine sacrifice for us, we are called to give our highest and costliest devotion to him, which is often exemplified by outsiders rather than insiders.

Let me say that again: Because of Jesus's divine sacrifice for us, we are called to give our highest and costliest devotion to him, which is often exemplified by outsiders rather than insiders.

Let's break that down together.

## **Jesus's Divine Sacrifice for Us**

First, central to our text this morning is Jesus's divine sacrifice for us.

We've seen earlier that Jesus is sent from God – Mark has identified him for us as the Son of God. And now the emphasis is on the fact that the reason Jesus has come is to make a sacrifice of himself for us. And we see this in a few ways in this passage.

We have here another Markan sandwich. At the top and the bottom of the passage we have the plot to kill Jesus.

And in the inner portion of the text – verses 3 through 9 – we see that Jesus knows that his death is coming, and seems to be at peace with it.

But why? Why does Jesus seem at peace with this? Why does he even seem to be going willingly? And why does he speak of being anointed for what's to come – of being set apart for it beforehand? How does Jesus understand his approaching death and its significance?

And here, how Mark introduces these events is key. Mark begins in verse 1: “It was now two days before the Passover.” The Passover was one of the central festivals in the Jewish calendar. And Mark wants us to be aware that all this was going to happen during the Passover. Because the Passover is the lens that explains the significance of Jesus's death.<sup>1</sup>

And the Passover is about God rescuing his people, through the sacrifice of a substitute.

Back in the book of Exodus, God's people were slaves in Egypt. And God came to rescue them. He demanded Pharaoh release his people. But Pharaoh refused. What followed was a series of judgments from God, against Pharaoh and against Egypt.

The final judgment God brought was that God himself would go out in the midst of Egypt. And every firstborn in the land of Egypt would die, as a result of God's judgment. [Exodus 11:4-5] The firstborn, in the ancient world, in many ways represented the family and its future. And so, the death of the firstborn was not just a judgment on that individual, but it was a symbolic judgment on the entire family.

God was coming, and he was bringing judgment on the land. But here's the thing. If God were to bring true judgment, then every firstborn would have to die: not just among the Egyptians, but also among the Israelites. No family could be spared. They would all have to be judged, because every person in the land – every family and every individual – had sinned. They had all broken God's law. They had all rebelled against his lordship in some way. And so they all stood guilty before God. The Bible tells us that this is true of every human being: all have sinned and stand guilty before our Maker.

The Israelites were now looking to God for rescue and salvation – they had God's favor and love through the covenant of grace – but the problem remained: If God, in all his holiness, came into the land, and brought his justice, how could his people, who were guilty of sin themselves, be spared?

That was the question.

And God's solution was the Passover.

God called on every family who trusted in him – every one of his people who put their faith in him – to take a lamb without blemish. Then, that night, before God visited them, at twilight, they were

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<sup>1</sup> And that seems to be even more true here, because Mark emphasizes the providential nature of Jesus's death coinciding with the Passover. In verse 2 we learn that the chief priests and scribes actually didn't want to arrest Jesus in conjunction with the Passover, because they feared an uprising from Jesus's followers. But then opportunity and circumstances in verses 10 and 11 cause them to change their mind. [Leithart, 253] The result, Mark shows us, is to bring the meaning and the purpose of Jesus's sacrifice into sharp focus, by having it coincide with the Passover celebrations.

to slaughter their lamb. After that, they were to take some of the blood from the lamb and paint it onto the doorframe of their house. And they were to then go into the house, to roast and prepare the lamb, and eat it together that night.

And that night God would come in judgment. And he would strike down the firstborn of every household in the land – he would bring his judgment on the land. But, when God saw the blood of the lamb over a doorway, he would pass over those inside, so that no judgment would fall on them. [Exodus 12:12-13] Rather than demanding the blood of that family’s firstborn, he would accept instead the blood of the lamb, as a substitute.

Or, to put it another way: in every house in Egypt that night, there was a death, due to sin. In each house, either a lamb was dead, or a firstborn was dead. [I first heard Tim Keller put it this way in a sermon, though I have not tracked down the original source.]

For those who put their trust in the Lord and in his grace, the lamb was a substitute, who died in their place.

And when Mark introduces the Passover in verse 1, and then signals that Jesus’s death would coincide with the Passover in verses 8 and 11, Mark is connecting the dots for us between the death of Jesus and the death of the Passover lamb – the sacrifice of Jesus, and the sacrifice of the Passover lamb.

This is Mark’s way of portraying to us what Jesus himself said just a couple chapters earlier, that Jesus came “to give his life as a ransom for many.” [Mark 10:45]

What the first Passover had enacted symbolically, Jesus would carry out in fullness: He was going to die the death we deserved to die, all so that as we trust in him – as we come under the sign of his blood – we could be saved: forgiven, cleansed, and made capable of coming into the presence of God.

Jesus’s death was not just a thing that happened. It was the reason he came. God had set him apart for it. And in verse 8 Jesus acknowledges that this woman has anointed him for the sacrifice that he would soon make.

Central to our text this morning is Jesus’s divine sacrifice: the truth that Jesus came, sent by God, to die upon the cross: to receive the judgment of God in our place, all so that we might be saved.

That’s the first thing we see here.

### **We Are Called to Give Our Highest and Costliest Devotion to Him**

But then with that, the next thing we see is that because of Jesus’s divine sacrifice for us, we are called to give our highest and costliest devotion to him.

And we see this in the woman.

The woman, we're told in verse 3, "came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head."

This ointment of pure nard was very expensive. As one commentator explains: "Mark stumbles over himself in Greek to convey the value of the nard." Three hundred denarii, the value given to it in verse 5 – was a full year's wages for most workers at this time. [Edwards, 413]

Think about that. As I mentioned recently, the median annual household income in Tacoma is around \$90,000 [[https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US5370000-tacoma-wa/#:~:text=Here's%20some%20census%20data%20for%20Tacoma%2C%20Washington%2C%20mobility\\*\\*%20\\*%2017.9%25%20Moved%20since%20previous%20year](https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US5370000-tacoma-wa/#:~:text=Here's%20some%20census%20data%20for%20Tacoma%2C%20Washington%2C%20mobility**%20*%2017.9%25%20Moved%20since%20previous%20year) with some adjustment for inflation]. This woman comes and pours out the equivalent for us of \$90,000 worth of ointment on Jesus. She breaks the flask in the process, showing the irrevocable totality of the gift [Edwards, 414]. She fully pours out this costly sacrifice for Jesus – to honor him.

And as I've said before, in the Bible, our financial giving to God is meant to be a symbol of the giving of our very selves. In pouring out her wealth for Jesus, this woman is symbolically pouring out herself for him: acknowledging her willingness to pour out not just her money, but her time, even her very life for Jesus's sake.

And she does this because of who Jesus is, and what he's come to do.

We've already talked about what Jesus has come to do: willingly offering himself as a sacrifice for us.

But along with what Jesus has come to do, who Jesus is is also essential to understanding this act of costly devotion. And this comes out in a striking way in this interaction.

Jesus receives this woman's anointing. And the disciples complain that this ointment could have been sold and the money used to help the poor. And Jesus responds by saying that it was better for this woman to spend all this wealth on him than for her to use it to help the poor.

Now that's a striking statement. And it makes us kind of uncomfortable. Elsewhere Jesus has spoken highly of helping the poor. So what are we to make of this?

Well, one thing we need to see is that this statement cannot be the teaching of a good, moral, religious instructor who is merely a human being. Only three kinds of people could really make a statement like Jesus does here. One is someone who is delusional – who has lost touch with reality. Another person who could make a statement like this would be a total and complete narcissist, with an evil and inflated sense of their own importance. And it should be obvious that someone that delusional or that narcissistic is not a reliable guide to moral or spiritual truth.

But the third option for how someone could make a statement like this, and the only option where such a person can still be a good and reliable spiritual and moral guide, is if the person who said it is more than human.

And that's what Jesus is claiming here. Earlier in Mark's gospel, Jesus said that the greatest commandment is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." Then Jesus added that the second greatest commandment is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [Mark 12:30-31]

In this passage, Jesus is saying that it's right for this woman to love him – to love Jesus – more than she loves her poor neighbors. And the only way that statement makes moral sense is if Jesus is God, and so to love him in this way is to fulfill the first great commandment, to love God above all. [Edwards, 415]

What we see here is that because Jesus is God, and because of his divine sacrifice for us, we are called to give our highest and costliest devotion to him in response.

### **This Is Often Exemplified by Outsiders Rather Than Insiders**

But there's one more thing we should probably see here in this passage. Because Mark also makes the point for us here that this kind of high and costly devotion is often exemplified by outsiders rather than insiders.

Now, I said "often," not always. This isn't a law, and there are many insiders in the church who make great sacrifices of devotion to Jesus and are exemplars for us all. I'm not denying that ... so don't hear what I'm not saying.

But at the same time, our text reminds us that outsiders – often new or young believers – outsiders often exemplify this kind of extreme devotion in a way that many insiders struggle to. In fact, outsiders and new believers can live out this kind of extreme devotion in a way that insiders in the Church can be tempted to dismiss or critique. But we see here that Jesus not only honors and loves this kind of extreme devotion – he wants us to see it and imitate it.

Consider the kinds of people in this text.

First, there are two kinds of insiders in this text. One is Judas. It's uncomfortable, but Judas was an insider. He was one of the twelve. We like to pretend like Judas wasn't really an insider – like he always obviously stood out as the problem disciple. But that's not the story the gospel writers tell.

As Tim Keller has put it, when Jesus said to the twelve "Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me" the other disciples didn't all lean towards each other and say "Judas!" They said "Is it I?" Judas, as far as anyone could see, was just as much an insider as the other 11 disciples. [Once again, I've heard Keller make this point in a sermon, but I have not tracked the source down.]

And that's a word of warning to us. Just being an "insider" in the church – whether it's growing up here, or having a position of influence in the church, or having skills that help people in the congregation, or knowing a lot of theology – just being an "insider" in the church is not enough.

In terms of his social standing in the Church, Judas was more of an insider than you'll ever be – he was one of the 12 – and look what happened to him.

So where did Judas go wrong?

There's all kinds of speculation about that, of course. We're told that greed had something to do with it. But we're not told much about Judas's inner psychology or the logic of his decision to betray Jesus in verse 10.

That said, I think the gospel writers do give us an additional clue in this story. In Matthew's telling of these same events, he includes the detail that the chief priests would give Judas 30 pieces of silver in exchange for Jesus. [Matthew 26:15]

Now, there's an allusion in this to Zechariah 11. But as one commentator points out, there's also probably an allusion here to Exodus 21. There we learn that in the law of Moses, 30 pieces of silver is what a slave was valued at, in the event of the slave's death. [Exodus 21:32] It's what was paid to the slave's master when his servant unexpectedly died. And it seems plausible to me that that connection is included for us to see that in the gospel writer's assessment – in the Holy Spirit's assessment – Judas had come to treat Jesus as if Jesus were his servant, and Judas was Jesus's master. [Leithart, 253-254]

And that may be one of the great dangers for an insider among the people of God. We can start to think of ourselves as being in charge, and to think of Jesus as someone who's there to serve our goals, and our purposes, which we confuse with God's.

Whatever else may have been true about Judas, by the end, he saw Jesus as just a means to an end in his own life. And when the things of God are so familiar to us, as insiders in the Church, we can be vulnerable to the same temptation.

Judas is the extreme opposite picture of the woman with the ointment in this passage. But are there ways that we – are there ways that you – can be tempted towards Judas's mindset ... ways that you want to set your own life plan, and have your own agenda, and determine your own future ... and that you see Jesus, in many ways, as being there primarily to make your plans happen? And if he doesn't serve you in that way, if he doesn't get in line and get with your agenda, then maybe you too are prone to treating him like a difficult servant – like a disobedient slave.

But Jesus is not our slave. And we are not his masters. Jesus is our King. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is worthy of our highest honor, devotion, and service, and Judas shows us the extreme picture of just how wrong we can get this.

What might you need to learn from Judas's negative example here?

But Judas isn't the only insider who gets things wrong here.

Second, there are the other disciples. Matthew tells us that they are the ones, in verses 4 and 5 of Mark's account, who criticize this woman indignantly, saying: "Why was this ointment wasted

like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” [Matthew 26:8-9]

And whether or not you see a bit of Judas’s tendency in your own heart, I think most of us who have been in the Church for a long time have to see the disciples’ tendency in ourselves. Because if we witnessed something like this, most of us would respond just like them.

Imagine some new believer in our congregation wanted to blow 90 grand on one event, with the only goal being that the event praise and glorify God. Imagine it was extravagant, and focused on the Lord, but it had no outreach benefits for those outside the church, no educational benefits for those inside church, no tangible benefit to us as a church community, no help for the poor or anyone in need in our area – the only goal and benefit of this \$90,000 event was that it would glorify God, for God’s sake.

How would we likely respond? We would criticize it. We would try to gently correct it. “Why waste all that money like that?” we might say. “That money could be spent on so many programs that could do so much good for so many people.” In other words, we would respond just like the disciples here.

Now, maybe the analogy doesn’t hold up in every respect. But even setting that aside: I know if I had been there, in the house of Simon the leper, at that moment, I would have probably joined the disciples in their criticism and indignation. Do you honestly think you wouldn’t? Frankly, in this moment of sensible practicality and frugality, the disciples sound just like Presbyterians!

But this response, we see here, is a failure to appreciate just how astounding it is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dwells with us. It’s taking for granted the mind-blowing claim that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died to make us his own. It’s a tendency to let the earth-shattering life-altering claims of the gospel become ordinary background noise in our lives.

If Jesus is who he says he is, and if Jesus has done what the Bible says he’s done, then worldly standards of what’s “sensible” no longer apply to what we should do with our money, or our time, or even our lives. Giving away your money generously isn’t “sensible” in the world’s eyes. Sacrificing your time and efforts to serve the church isn’t “sensible” from a worldly perspective. Giving your life to ministry, whether in the domestic church or abroad, whether in local ministry or missions work around the world, whether in a formal organization or in your organic relationships to those in your life – giving your life to ministry, and encouraging your children to do so – that’s not “sensible” in any worldly sense. It’s not a path to financial security, or worldly power, or even to earthly happiness. These sacrifices are not “sensible.” In fact, they make no sense at all ... unless Jesus is who he says he is, and Jesus has done what he says he’s done.

And as insiders, so used to the claims of the gospel, sometimes we can lose sight of that.

And when we do, Jesus calls us to look to this woman and others like her as models for us to imitate. He calls us to look to those who have not lost a sense of the astounding nature of the gospel, and to let their vision of Jesus influence our own.

Sometimes this means looking to new converts to faith in Jesus, who have seen in new, and fresh, and deep ways the incredible claims of who Jesus is and what he's done for us.

Sometimes it's looking to the forming faith of our covenant children, as they learn astounding claims about God from the Bible and their eyes get big, and their hearts are captured, and they believe without reservation. Focusing on and imitating them may sound overly sentimental to a bunch of sophisticated Presbyterians, but our Lord himself commanded us to "turn and become like children" and to "receive the kingdom of God like a child." [Matthew 18:2-3; Mark 10:15]

Other times, we are called to look to historical Christians figures, who were captured in a deep and profound way by this vision of who Jesus is, and what he has done for us, and who held onto that vision so that it shaped their lives in profound ways.<sup>2</sup>

Looking to new believers, to children, to historical figures known as oddities in the life of the church – that might be hard for us. But I think that's what Mark calls us to in telling this story, and what Jesus calls us to in verse 9.

Because here, it's the outsiders who "get it" more clearly than the insiders. These events take place not in Jerusalem or in the Temple, but outside both, in Bethany. The host is not an insider, but Simon the Leper – a likely outsider to the ceremonial Temple structure. Mark leaves this woman unnamed, emphasizing her outsider status. In addition to that, the woman was a woman – by definition an outsider to the power structures of Judaism and the ancient world. Finally, this woman was clearly viewed by the disciples as being beneath them, and therefore a valid target for their judgment and criticism. And so, in many ways, this woman was an outsider – she was not where a first-century Jew or one of the early disciples of Jesus expected to find an exemplar of faith. And yet that's what she was. [Edwards, 414]

Jesus directs our attention to her and people like her as possible exemplars to imitate, for those who are insiders and have lost their appreciation for the shocking nature of the gospel.

So, for those of us who are good, sensible Presbyterians – let us take note. Let us have the humility to see that sometimes our being sensible is our being worldly. Sometimes our "wisdom" is worldly wisdom. Sometimes we lose sight of the amazing and stupendous claims of the gospel, about who Jesus is and what he's done. And so, let us look to those who see that more clearly – even if they seem less established, and less respectable, and even less sensible to us. Let us learn from them, as Jesus calls us to here.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>2</sup> For me, I think Francis of Assisi is one of the best historical examples of this. Francis never seemed to lose his vision for who Jesus is and what he had done. It shaped his life, and in some ways made him a life-long "outsider" to the established church, even though his ministry ended up transforming and reforming the medieval church of his day. (If you're interested in reading about Francis, Lawrence S. Cunningham's *Francis of Assisi* is a good place to start. I especially liked Raoul Manselli's *Francis of Assisi*, but I believe it's out of print. Also, the first two volumes of New City Press's *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (The Saint and The Founder)* have some wonderful primary sources and early documents.)

Jesus, God himself, has come to us, and he has made an incredible sacrifice for us. He has become our true Passover lamb, giving his life, in our place, to save us.

This calls for us to give him our highest and costliest devotion.

What does that mean for you? What is he calling you to give for him? What is the flask of costly ointment that he's calling you to pour out for him?

Maybe you're already pouring it out – you're already living sacrificially in ways he's called you to. If so, let this passage be an encouragement to you that your sacrifice is not in vain. Even if your sacrifice for God seems foolish in the eyes of the world, even if it doesn't seem sensible in the eyes of the sophisticated, even if others discourage you, let the story of this faithful woman remind you that though no one else sees the goodness and glory of your sacrifice, Jesus sees it. And though no one else praises you for it, Jesus praises you. And though no one else would be worthy of the sacrifice you are making, Jesus is worthy of it. So continue, out of love for him – out of thanksgiving and devotion to him – continue to pour out your flask of ointment on him.

Or maybe you're someone still clutching on to your flask of ointment. Maybe you're someone determined to use what you've been given in a more prudent and sensible way – at least in the world's eyes. Maybe you have your own plans and your own purpose for it.

If that's you, then our text this morning calls you to remember who Jesus is, and what he's done for you, and to pour out your highest and costliest devotion to him. He is worthy of it. And there is no better way to spend what he's given you.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus, our God and King, has given all for us. And so, in whatever way he's called us to, let us each seek to give all we have for him.

He is worthy.

And so let us pour out our flasks of ointment – let us pour out our very lives – for him.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.

Leithart, Peter J. *The Gospel of Matthew Through New Eyes; Volume One: Jesus as Israel*. Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2017.

Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or

recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.