

A BEAUTIFUL THING

Matthew 26:1-16

Key Verse: 26:10

“Aware of this, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.’”

Matthew chapters 26-28 cover Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. This is the core of our Christian faith. Today’s passage serves as a prelude to Jesus’ passion. It is mainly about the affectionate act of a woman toward Jesus. She came to Jesus during a dinner party and poured a whole bottle of perfume on his head. It was mysterious and controversial. But Jesus said it was a beautiful thing. Jesus teaches us what is truly beautiful in God’s sight. Do you want to be beautiful? What is beauty? Is it an attractive appearance? Every year People Magazine publishes the so-called most beautiful people. They look nice, but they are inwardly corrupt. Today we learn who is truly beautiful to Jesus. Let’s all be among the beautiful people in Jesus’ eyes.

First, the Son of Man will be crucified (1-5).

Look at verse 1. “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples....” Jesus had been teaching about the signs of the end of the age and his coming again in power and great glory. This was Jesus’ fifth and final great discourse in Matthew’s gospel (see 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; compare to 26:1). Jesus’ teaching ministry concludes here. Now Jesus would seal his teaching with his lifeblood. Of course, there have been other great teachers who died for their beliefs. For example, Socrates taught young people to honor virtue more than fleeting pleasure. When opposed by city fathers, he chose to die rather than renounce his teachings. Jesus’ death far exceeds that. Jesus’ death fulfills the priestly duty as a ransom sacrifice for sinners.

Jesus told his disciples in verse 2, “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” Jesus spoke of his death against the background of the Passover. The Passover commemorated God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God exerted his mighty power through ten plagues against the Egyptians. The last plague, the plague of death on the firstborn, broke the heart and pride of Pharaoh and he set the Israelites free. The Israelites were not necessarily holier than the Egyptians, they too were sinners. However, God spared them when they obeyed his command to put the blood of a lamb on the doorframes of their houses. This looked forward to the coming of Christ. 1 Corinthians 5:7b says, “For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed.” Jesus sacrificed his life and shed his blood on the cross to set men free from bondage to sin and the devil, and to save us from the wrath of God. Whoever believes in the blood of Jesus receives salvation and true freedom.

In verse 2 Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man.” This is a Messianic title (Dan 7:13,14), and emphasizes that he fulfills the promise of God. This promise was made first in Genesis 3:15, and was developed further through promises to Abraham and David, and through the words of the prophets. Jesus’ crucifixion was precisely the will of God. It was God’s way to save men from their sins.

Look at verses 3-5. The chief priests and the elders of the people met together in the palace of the high priest. They plotted to arrest Jesus and kill him. They were deceptive and murderous. They thought they were in control. In reality, God used them to fulfill his own purpose. God carries out his world salvation plan without fail, even through evil men. In the end, all things work together for God’s good purpose.

Second, a beautiful woman and ugly disciples (6-9).

As we have studied, Jesus’ crucifixion was imminent. What was the spiritual condition of Jesus’ disciples and the people around him? In verses 6-9 Matthew reveals a surprising contrast between a woman and Jesus’ disciples. Look at verses 6-7. “While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.” This event or a similar event, is recorded in each gospel book, with variations. Matthew’s account is the briefest of all. However, he includes details that are unique. Only Matthew tells us that Simon was known as Simon the Leper. Luke calls him Simon the Pharisee. Perhaps “Leper” and “Pharisee” were synonymous to Matthew. In other

accounts, the woman pours perfume on Jesus' feet. But in this account she pours perfume on his head. Matthew, who sees Jesus as the King, portrays his anointing as king.

This is really an amazing scene and it was so impressive that it remains forever in gospel history. Jesus and the dignified guests were reclining at the table. The dinner party must have been well prepared; table talk was noble. Suddenly, a woman came in and poured a whole bottle of perfume on Jesus' head.

What made her do this? In Luke's account, she was a woman who had lived a sinful life. She felt wasted and useless. Then she heard that Jesus had authority to forgive sins. She came to Jesus with sincere repentance. Jesus forgave her sins. She anointed Jesus to express her deep gratitude and affection. In John's gospel, the woman is Mary. She anointed Jesus to thank him for raising her brother from the dead, and to repent her doubt of his love. Matthew's account does not tell us specifically why she did this, perhaps suggesting that she understood the meaning of Jesus' death. Her act may have been an intentional expression of thanks to Jesus, who would become the Lamb of God.

Whatever her immediate motivation, one thing is clear: she lavished her love upon Jesus. The perfume was very expensive. She had saved it for her future wedding. It was the most precious thing she had. When she poured it on Jesus' head, she was giving her unconditional and wholehearted affection to Jesus. She did not care what anyone thought about her. She only wanted Jesus to know that he was everything to her. It was an act of worshiping Jesus.

Look at verses 8-9. "When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. 'Why this waste?' they asked. 'This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.'" The disciples were upset with the woman. They thought she was crazy. They did not see the woman's heart. What is worse, they did not see Jesus as he truly is. They only saw the dollar value of the perfume. This is really surprising. Jesus had spent great effort to reveal to them that he is the Son of God. They should have realized that Jesus deserved such lavish anointing, and even more. But they only calculated the financial value and lamented the loss. John's gospel says that it was Judas Iscariot who said this, because he really wanted the money for himself. Matthew, does not single out Judas. He suggests that they all needed to repent their materialism. This made them ugly disciples, for the time being.

Third, Jesus said, "She has done a beautiful thing to me" (10-16).

How did Jesus deal with this situation? Look at verse 10. "Aware of this, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.'" Jesus did not agree with his disciples. Rather, Jesus defended the woman. Jesus made an environment where women could worship and serve him freely. This is why so many godly women loved to be around Jesus. They became the energy source and support network for Jesus' ministry. The agony of many women is that their acts of affection are not properly appreciated. When women pour out their hearts to express extravagant love, they should be loved and protected in return. But mean people treat their pure devotion with indifference, or even contempt. Recently I saw a young woman serve Jesus with all her heart. Then several young people began to ridicule her and slander her. They look like ugly people. Jesus is different. Jesus honors a woman's wholehearted service. Jesus calls it a beautiful thing.

It could have been awkward for Jesus to receive the anointing. As a man, to have a whole bottle of perfume dripping down his head and neck, down onto his garments, was uncomfortable. But Jesus did not feel awkward. Jesus saw the woman's heart. Jesus accepted the woman's heart. Jesus treasured the woman's love and called her action beautiful. A truly beautiful woman loves Jesus with all her heart. A truly beautiful woman gives everything to Jesus. True beauty comes from Jesus' love in our hearts, not from a bottle of makeup, silky garments, or hair dye. The woman's love was the reflection of Jesus' love. It was this love that compelled Jesus to pour out his blood for mankind. Humanly speaking, Jesus' death looked like a waste. He was just 33 years old. He could have done many more good works. He died in the prime of life. Yet Jesus did so in obedience to God. It was Jesus' love for God. It was Jesus' love for us. Jesus' sacrifice is the fountain of God's love and the most beautiful thing in history. Whoever receives this love becomes a beautiful person who can love Jesus and love others too.

We learn a great lesson from Jesus. It is to appreciate true beauty in any situation. Jesus was about to die on a cross. But he was not so burdened by this that he became indifferent. He recognized a truly beautiful woman and he was encouraged by her. Some people never see anything beautiful. They say, "This is ugly," and, "That's ugly," and complain. There are so many beautiful things, especially the beauty of Jesus in God's people. To recognize and

appreciate them encourages them and is healthy for us. Living in Chicago, we have the privilege of seeing Mother Barry on a regular basis. She may be the most beautiful woman in the world because of her love for Jesus. As the only daughter of a noble southern family, she could have lived like a princess in Mississippi. But after tasting the love of Jesus, she decided to pour out her life in love for Jesus. So she never married, though there were many candidates. To obey Jesus' world mission command, she went to Korea right after the Korean War. She lived as ordinary Korean people did, eating kimchee sandwiches and sleeping on the floor. Later, she met a truly great man, Dr. Samuel Lee, and coworked with him in a most fruitful way. This gave birth to UBF and produced hundreds of missionaries for the gospel. Tomorrow she turns 77. But her heart is ever young to understand all kinds of young people and to show the affection of Christ for them. Her home is always open to God's children for Bible study and delicious home-cooked meals. She is also very strong. Even after traveling widely for two weeks, when she returned to Chicago, she resumed her disciplined prayer life and wholehearted service for God's people without getting sick, like I did. Whenever we feel that the world is dark, it is good to think about the beauty of Jesus in God's people.

We also learn from Jesus that we must overcome a pragmatic view of life. Pragmatically speaking, sacrificial lives of godly women may look like a waste. Since my wife Deborah joined Loyola ministry, she has done her best to meet students and have one-to-one Bible study. No one has remained. No one has grown as Jesus' disciple. Sometimes it looks like a waste. Once, as she left for a one-to-one Bible study, I thought to myself, "You are crazy. Come back and do the dishes and laundry, and clean the house." But to Jesus, this is a truly beautiful thing. I repent the vestige of pragmatic thinking in my inner man.

Look at verse 11. Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." To help the poor is good. Most relief agencies were started out of Christian compassion. America, which has a Christian heritage, is very mindful of handicapped people and we give them the best parking places. However, Hindu cultures consider handicapped people cursed by God and discourage any kind of effort to alleviate their suffering; they never give them good parking places. Jesus' disciples should be mindful of all poor and needy people. But their first priority must be to worship and serve Jesus himself.

Look at verses 12-13. "When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." Jesus honored the woman's act highly and made it part of his everlasting gospel history.

In contrast, Judas Iscariot became a traitor. He went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" He failed to form a love relationship with Jesus. Instead of becoming beautiful, he grew ugly. When the time to sacrifice came, he wanted to abandon Jesus, getting whatever benefit possible.

There are beautiful people and ugly people. Beautiful people receive Jesus' love and love Jesus with all their hearts. Ugly people ignore Jesus' love. They become selfish benefit seekers and traitors. May God help each of us to be one of the beautiful people.