

Remembered for Generosity

Mark 14:3-9

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How do you want to be remembered? When we lose members of our community, it makes us ask that question. Once I went to a Stephen Covey seminar called *First Things First*. It began with an exercise: write a speech that you'd like someone to give about you at your funeral. In other words: identify the things you want to be remembered for, and make those your goals.

I'm pretty sure I'll be remembered as a pastor, as a husband and father, as a friend—in the roles I took on. I'd like to think I'll be remembered as creative, or a writer; one reason people write poems or even sermons is in the vain hope that they will be remembered. I hope I will be remembered as kind.

But one fear I have is that I will be remembered—by my children at least—as cheap. Jack Benny had nothing on me. No doubt at my funeral there will be some jokes about how I never went on a date without a coupon, or how I never paid full price for one thing in my life. It wasn't a surprise when my mother did some genealogical research that I learned that I had a good deal of Scottish in my blood. (I was going to say that I had a good deal of Scotch in my blood, but I knew some of you would take that the wrong way.)

So maybe I will be remembered as cheap, but I really hope that I'll be remembered as generous. I want to be remembered as a giver, not a taker. How about you?

Jesus promised one woman that she would be remembered for her generosity. All over the world, wherever the gospel story was told, she would be remembered, not for her name but for her act of extravagant giving. We read the story earlier from Mark. Before the story of this anointing, Mark says that the religious leadership and biblical scholars were trying to figure out how to kill Jesus. After this story, Mark says that Judas went to them and betrayed Jesus. So that's the frame. But here in the story we have this strange incident of devotion, frozen in time without explanation, a picture of someone loving Jesus with her whole heart.

Jesus is at the home of Simon the leper—who must now be Simon the ex-leper, or no one would be at his house. He had no doubt been healed by Jesus, and wanted to thank him by having him over for dinner. Not everyone would have accepted an invitation from a leper, even one who had been healed. Jesus is at dinner with some of Simon's friends and probably his own disciples—all men. In walks this woman, apparently unknown to them. Don't confuse Mark's story with other stories about a prostitute or Mary of Bethany who wiped Jesus' feet with their hair. This is apparently a different incident, and in any case Mark wants us to read it that way. All we can guess about this woman is that she was rich. She had an alabaster flask, in itself pretty fancy, but in it was a perfumed ointment made of pure nard, which came from India near the Himalayas. It was expensive, worth an amount equal to a year's salary at minimum wage—so in today's terms, a bottle of perfume worth \$15,000.

I doubt she bought it for Jesus. Most likely a rich man gave it to her. Perhaps she had treasured it for years, saving it for a special occasion. We don't know. But on this night she walked right into Simon's house and stood behind where Jesus was sitting, and she broke the neck of the alabaster bottle and poured the entire contents on Jesus' head.

What did she mean by that? Well, it wasn't that unusual to anoint your guest's head as a gesture of hospitality; the 23rd psalm says "he anointeth my head with oil." People didn't bathe

much back then, and it was rub a little good-smelling stuff into their hair. But a whole bottle? More likely this gesture was intended as an anointing, the way the kings of Israel and Judah were anointed when they took office. The name Messiah means Anointed One. I'm guessing that this woman was saying to Jesus, yes, I believe that you are the king, and I am here to anoint you in secret before you bring in your kingdom.

You remember how other people reacted to this gesture, though. They seemed to think that this was crazy love, an expression of devotion that was completely out of line. They thought—and I'm guessing they were all men—that only a woman would waste that kind of money on love. \$15,000 down the drain in perfume? Think what we could have done with that money in Helping Hands. And of course Jesus was all for helping the poor; that was a large part of his mission.

But when Jesus saw how they reacted to this act of love and generosity, he said, "Leave her alone. Why are you harassing her? She has done something beautiful for me"—meaning, I think, more beautiful than anything you have ever done for me. She understands the significance of this time in my life more than you do. She did what she could. What she had was this bottle of perfume, and she chose to give it to me. That's beautiful.

But there is something else. Nard was also used on dead bodies to keep them from smelling. In the *Iliad*, Achilles anoints the body of another warrior with nard. Jesus knows that he is going to die soon. He's been telling his followers this, but they do not believe him. And when Jesus smells the aroma of nard filling the room, he knows that whether this woman intended it or not, she is preparing his body for death. And because this act of generosity is part of the story of God's generosity to us on the cross, this act will be retold in memory of this woman. What she has done will not be forgotten. She will be remembered for only one thing: her extravagant generosity.

There is a contrast here between extravagant giving and calculated giving. Sometimes giving is all about practical purposes and the dollar value of what we give. That's where the critics of the woman are coming from. But for the woman herself giving is about love and adoration. It doesn't have to be practical. We don't have to count the cost. We just do it.

The only other person I can think of whom Jesus praised for generosity was also a woman, also unnamed: the widow who brought her two mites, her two pennies, and placed it in the offering at the temple. Jesus knew that the temple had far more money than the widow, and that the temple was largely corrupt and wasteful. But Jesus praised her act of devotion. Others made a big deal of the size of their gifts, but this widow gave all that she had. And she was not giving it to the temple but to God. It was her way of giving herself to God without reservation. That's what Jesus admired.

How can we really give anything to God? How can we be generous to God when God already has everything? That's the question asked by Solomon when the temple was dedicated: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chronicles 29:14). Yes, it all comes from God but God has created us with a desire to give back to him—as a way of showing our love for him. Did your father ever give you money so that you could go to the store and buy a gift for your mother? It's kind of like that. It's not really our money, but it is our love.

At first in the history of God's friendship with humans, people brought him animals and burned them—there was nothing left. Did God just really like the smell of burning animals? Maybe—I like grilling meat myself—but I really think what God liked was the smell of love. By

the time the temple was built, the animals would be cooked and shared among the priests and the family members who brought the animals, and gifts of grain and money were brought to support the work of the temple. Christians give back to God in a similar way, by giving to the church to support God's work on earth. That's the present God wants. But of course it's the love that still smells good to God.

How much should we give? Christians are not bound by the Jewish law, but we do still take seriously the basic moral principles we find in the Old Testament. There we see that God's people were commanded to care for the poor, to give special offerings for them, but they were also told to give a tithe—ten percent—of their harvest to the temple to support their common life of worship and celebration and community identity. Christians have often looked back to that as a guideline, not a law, but they've asked themselves, "Now that Jesus has given himself for us, should we be giving less to God than we gave *before* Jesus died for us?" We know that the critical thing is to give *ourselves* to God as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1) but we are also to give our money to God. Paul says of the church in Macedonia that first they gave themselves to the Lord but then they gave themselves to *us* (the preachers) by sharing in the offering.

As we think about our pledges for 2011, we ought to be asking ourselves *not* "How does it compare to last year?" but "How does it compare to what Jesus gave to us? How does it compare to the tithes God's people gave under the old covenant? How does it compare to the woman with the alabaster jar? How does it compare to the woman who gave her last two pennies?" Does my pledge represent calculated giving—what's my fair share? what's a reasonable percentage?—or does it represent *extravagant* giving?

We can be remembered as generous whether we have a little or a lot. That's one of the good things about the tithe: even a kid with one dollar can give a dime to Jesus. All of us, however poor, have the choice of being generous. You know that my parents were missionaries in Japan in the years after Japan had lost the war. Most of the people were poor then. The Japanese ladies in my mother's group couldn't understand how American women could raise money for missions. Japanese women had no money except for a small grocery allowance. There was no idea of a "family budget." What the husband earned belonged to him. But these Christian women wanted to give to the annual Christmas offering for missions, so they came up with an idea. In those days, a typical meal consisted of a bowl of rice topped with a few vegetables, seaweed, and perhaps an occasional egg or bits of meat. Three meals a day. These women decided that during the weeks leading up to Christmas they could just eat plain rice themselves, while giving their families their usual meals. The few yen they saved by denying themselves a half-dozen peas or strips of seaweed would eventually add up to a small offering for Jesus. Jesus must have prized their offering more than the millions given by those who could easily afford it. It was extravagant generosity. I'm sure it smelled like love to him. I wish I could be remembered as being that generous.

A half century ago the Baptist preacher Roy Angell used to tell the story of a college friend named Paul who got an automobile as a present from his brother before Christmas. On Christmas Eve, Paul found a street urchin walking around his shiny new car, admiring it. "Is this your car, mister?" he asked.

Paul nodded. "My brother gave it to me for Christmas."

The boy looked astounded. "You mean your brother gave it to you, and it didn't cost you *nothing*? Boy, I wish..." Paul knew what he was going to wish. He was going to wish *he* had a brother like that. But instead, the boy said, "I wish *I* could be a brother like that."

Paul was so impressed he offered the kid a ride in his car. The boy asked if they could drive in front of his house. Paul thought he wanted to show his neighbors his “sweet ride.” But he was wrong again. They stopped in front of the boy’s house, and he ran inside. He came out carrying his little polio-crippled brother. The older boy sat him down on the bottom step and squeezed up against him, pointing to the car. “There it is. His brother gave it to him for Christmas, and it didn’t cost him a cent. Someday I’m going to give you one just like it, so you can see for yourself all the things in the Christmas windows I’ve been telling you about.”

Paul lifted the little polio victim into the front seat of his car. The older brother got in next to him, his eyes shining, and the three of them took a trip to see the Christmas windows. Paul learned that night what Jesus meant when he said, “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving” [James Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited*, Tyndale House, 1988, p. 235].

I wish I could be a brother like that. I wish I could be remembered as generous like that. I wish I could be like that woman who brought her precious alabaster flask of perfume and poured it all out for Jesus.