

**A Beautiful Thing**  
**September 2, 2018**  
**Dan Crump**

This sermon marks a departure for me. I have always stuck to the direction of the lectionary to maintain the claim that I am responding to someone else's question, following orders, if you will, rather than relying on my faltering attempts to hear God's direction. But, from the time I learned that my number was up this Sunday, I have felt that I needed to engage with this troublesome passage from Mark, even though it meant leaving behind the support from the lectionary I have come to rely upon. God help me. We will see if I do this again.

“For you always have the poor with you.” This line seems to make the case for indulgent opulence over concerns for the wellbeing of the poor, and has been used for centuries to justify the glorification of institutions such as churches over the needs of individuals. It has been used to justify legislation that permits Wall Street to fatten itself with little or no regulation to ensure that the expected rising tide does lift all boats, to make sure that everyone actually has a boat, metaphorically speaking. To be honest, this statement has crossed my mind when I have indulged in a wonderful meal or a special bottle of wine. How can I enjoy such pleasure knowing that people are dying of starvation even while I am “helping myself” to seconds. And yet, I do. In a world of nice things, of special things, perhaps poverty is just a fact, a necessary evil. In order for some to have, some must not have. It is left to me to deal with it.

This is truly a troublesome passage. It appears to directly contradict most of what Jesus says elsewhere. “Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger.” “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor.” “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” And yet, this statement appears with few

variations in three of the four gospels. The gospel of Luke which many say emphasizes issues of inequality, gives no mention of Jesus' rebuke of those voicing their concerns for the poor, suggesting that even the first Christians viewed this text as problematic. The lectionary reflects this view, as well. Mark's version only crops up in the lectionary during Easter, and then, is essentially buried in a large narrative of the passion. Turns out, the only way to give it the attention that I am feeling called to give it is to, if only for one Sunday, abandon the lectionary. So, there.

This story takes place within a few days of Jesus' arrest. Jesus is seated at the table as a woman enters with an "alabaster jar." The word in the original text is alabastron which was a vial made from clay, glass, or carved from a smooth, relatively soft stone called alabaster. You might have seen one of these in a museum. They were made to hold massage oils or perfumes. Typically, they have a bulbous shape with a small hole in the top to dispense the contents in small amounts.

In this case, the contents was nard. According to Wikipedia, nard is an aromatic essential oil derived from the roots of a flowering plant that grows at an altitude of 10 to 15 thousand feet in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India. It is still used as a perfume, an herbal medicine, and in religious ceremonies from India to Europe. Given the difficulty of harvesting the plant at that altitude, then crushing and distilling the oil, then transporting the nard such a distance, it is no wonder that it was very costly. It is no wonder that it was contained in a vial designed to dispense its contents in very small amounts in order to make such an extravagant purchase last a long time.

Now, our text says that the woman broke open the jar, suggesting that she broke the seal, or popped the top, in a normal way to use it in a normal way. But the word translated as broke actually means broken in pieces, crushed, or shattered. It is the same word used to describe what Jesus is going to do to Satan when the time comes. So that jar would have no longer been

recognizable as a jar, let alone able hold anything. She used it up, all at once.

And, boy, did those bystanders get mad! I have to wonder why. It was her property, bought and paid for, to do with as she willed. Right? There are a lot of unknowns in this story. For as much as Jesus says at the end of the passage that what the woman did will be remembered whenever the gospel is proclaimed, her name, her economic status, what she had to do to get the money, a year's average wages by some accounts, were not recorded and so cannot be remembered by anyone. If we had those facts, we could assess what dumping a whole bottle of perfume on Jesus' head cost her, as if assessing her cost, the percentage of her total household income, her earning ability to recoup the loss, would allow us to measure exactly how much honor she was showing Jesus, by assessing how hard it hit her bottom line.

I think this gets at the root of the onlookers' indignation. Her offense was not in spending money that could have gone to the poor. They no doubt did that themselves, as we do, whenever we consume one mouthful more than what life requires while someone is dying because they do not have enough. I think they were angry because she obliterated the measure by which they could say, "We have done enough," whether it was helping the poor, or honoring Jesus.

I'll call your attention to the passage we read earlier from Deuteronomy. I apologize to Gerri for asking her to read what sounds like the fine print on a mortgage. It claims to prescribe the means by which poverty can be eliminated in a community. "There will be no one in need if you do such and such." Then, at the end, it says, "There will never cease to be some in need on the earth." Some commentators say that Jesus is referencing this line in his troubling rebuke. Forgive me for saying this, but with all the switch-backs, contradictions, and addenda, the Deuteronomy passage sounds a little like a presidential tweet. Except for the,

“Open your hand to the poor in your land,” part. I do find the idea of lending to the needy, and then dissolving the loan if not paid back in seven years, intriguing. It gives that struggling family seven years to redeem themselves, to restore their own self-respect, then if they still haven’t gotten back on their feet, they can rightly claim that it is not for lack of trying, and that, perhaps, the problem is bigger than simply a lack of money. We can leave that discussion for another time, however.

In our usual translation, the NRSV, Jesus says, “Let her alone. She has performed a good service for me.” The Revised Standard Version reads this way. “She has done a beautiful thing to me.” A beautiful thing. This translation is actually closer to the original text. The Greek word is *kalon*, translated as both beautiful and good, fair in the sense of pleasing and fair in the sense of equitable. Jesus is recorded using this word many times, and in some of his most troubling statements. When the Syro-Phoenician woman asks him to help her daughter in Mark, chapter 7, next week’s lectionary passage, Jesus answers, “It is not ‘*kalon*’ to give the children’s bread to the dogs,” suggesting that whatever *kalon* is, it is preferable to helping the woman’s daughter. As I said, troubling.

Merriam-Webster defines *kalon* as “the ideal of physical and moral beauty as conceived by the philosophers of classical Greece.” As a subjective experience, the definition of beauty is difficult beyond the description of the effect an encounter with the beautiful has on the beholder. I would ask you all to call to mind a time when you encountered a beautiful thing, one that you could not buy or otherwise claim for your own. Laura Nelke’s beautiful show at the clinic comes to my mind. Did you notice that none of her work was “for sale?” Those paintings were only available to you during the time you allotted to present yourself to them.

Professor Elaine Scarry, in her book, On Beauty and Being Fair, speaks of this experience as a radical decentering of the self. She quotes Simone Weil (vay-ee), beauty requires us “to

give up our imaginary position as the center.” Professor Scarry writes, “It is as though one has ceased to be the hero or heroine in one’s own story and has become what in a folktale is called a ‘lateral figure’ or ‘donor figure’.” In other words, I am no longer at the center of the universe, I am next to it. It is a kind of demotion or marginalization of the self which in many situations can be very painful, but the odd thing about the encounter with the beautiful is that you don’t want it to stop! And if it does, you want it to happen again, and again!

Beauty, Scarry suggests, is the experience of the encounter with the beautiful, it is the recognition that a thing is beautiful and the effect that that recognition has on the beholder. It is an experience that seeks to replicate itself. Seeing the beauty of the albatross, one can more easily see the beauty of the sea gull. Seeing the beauty of the child, one can more easily see the beauty of the man who once was a child. Beauty becomes a practice of seeing more and more things as beautiful. In this practice, Scarry contends, the opposite of beauty is not ugliness, but injury, which is another word for injustice. Ugliness is not the failure of something to be beautiful, it is the failure of the beholder to perceive the beauty that is there, an injustice to be sure.

This is a hard time to care for the poor. We hear politicians tell us that pay-loans are a valuable service for families who struggle to make ends meet, but we see those families destroyed by outrageous interest rates. We see legislation that promises lower taxes, but only increases the disparity between the richest and the poorest. We hear claims of more jobs created, but we see more children living in poverty. We are caught between the fear that we are not doing enough, and the soul-draining desire to know that we are.

Those onlookers wanted to convert the woman’s perfume back into money, as if its only worth was in how much it could be sold for, as if the poor would only have worth if they had that money. When the woman shattered the bottle and showered

Jesus with its contents, she proved that worth doesn't come from money, it comes from the beautiful thing that God created each of us to be. She took the value the people saw in that little bottle and assigned it all to Jesus.

Of course, we need to do what we can to help everyone who struggles to live in this insane world that seeks to convert everything we need to live into money — food, water, air, a place to call home. Perhaps we need to follow that woman's example and smash the notion that money will fix all our problems. Jesus said what the woman did would be remembered every time the good news is proclaimed. The good news that each and every one of us is a beautiful thing.