

Haydenville Congregational Church  
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian  
April 1, 2012~~Palm Sunday  
Mark 14:1-9

"Doing Lovely Things for God"

Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.  
Fill the hearts of your faithful,  
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.

When you travel to the Holy Land, to Israel, there are many sacred sites to visit. Israel is a holy place for Jews, Muslims and Christians. It is a remarkable place to wander and look, listen, and feel the energy of the land, the sacred sites, and the people.

For Christians, one of the holiest of the holy sites is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built on the site where, it is believed, Jesus was crucified, and it holds the tomb in which he was laid.

The church is huge and ornate, dark and somber. People speak in hushed tones if they speak at all. And sometimes throughout the day you can see an unusual thing. Women-usually women from Jerusalem, not tourists-come to the church and kneel next to a large, flat raised rock called the Stone of Anointing. This is the rock where, it is believed, Jesus' body was laid and prepared for burial.

The Stone of Anointing is on a raised platform about 18 inches off the ground. Women come and pray at the stone. But they do more than that. The women kneeling at the Stone of Anointing pour olive oil on the stone, then they take out cotton balls and carefully mop up the olive oil. When the cotton balls are saturated, they squeeze the oil into glass bottles they have brought with them. Apparently, they take the oil home and use it to anoint their children and loved ones.

The women consider the olive oil holy because it has touched the stone where, it is believed, Jesus' body once lay. The women who invented this ritual have created a way to make olive oil, which is common, into anointing oil, which is sacred, by pouring the oil on the stone and collecting it once again.

What does it mean to anoint and why is anointing so important? To anoint is to

pour or smear perfumed oil or another substance on a forehead or a body in a ritual practiced by many religions. People are anointed to symbolize the introduction of a sacramental or divine influence, the touch of a holy spirit, or the presence of God. Anointing is used as a way to confer a special blessing, to hasten healing, to rid someone of dangerous influences such as demons believed to cause disease, to prepare a body for death, or to bless a body once a person has died. In ancient times, anointing also occurred in intimate moments between a husband and wife. A wife would anoint her husband as a sign of her affection and loyalty.

The title "Christ," which is used almost as if it were a surname for Jesus, is derived from the Greek word "Khristos" which means "the anointed one." The title "Messiah" also means "the anointed one." And so it is powerful and prophetic that we hear in the Gospel of Mark about the woman who comes to Jesus with a jar of costly ointment, breaks the jar open and pours the ointment on Jesus' head.

At the end of his life, Jesus, "the anointed one," is finally anointed by a woman...a woman who has no name in the story, a woman who is scolded by the disciples because they react to the anointing with anger. The disciples think the woman is being extravagant, they believe the oil was "wasted." They complain that they oil could have been sold for a considerable sum and the money given to the poor. But Jesus is grateful for the anointing and he defends what the woman has done.

Although this is a brief story, it is a significant moment in Jesus' life and an important interaction...one with poignant moments and ironic twists.

The first detail that is unusual if not shocking is that a woman comes to find Jesus at Simon's house. A woman. Already, because of her gender, she is an unlikely person to have the major part in an important story about Jesus. Women were the property of men....so where is the man who is supposed to accompany her?

Why is she traveling anywhere alone? What right does she have to see Jesus? Who is this brave, unnamed woman?

Furthermore this woman brings an alabaster jar filled with "very costly ointment"...where did she get this ointment? Is this a woman of wealth?

She comes right up to Jesus, breaks the jar of costly perfumed oil, and pours it all on his head-not a few drops as custom would dictate, but all of it. The oil is worth 300 denari, the equivalent of a year's income. Clearly this woman is bold and determined-she pours all the oil on Jesus' head.

And to do that this woman must have been right up close to Jesus...

which means she touched him.

A woman was not supposed to touch any man except her husband. This woman is touching Jesus-that is so outrageous. And she is pouring oil on his head-that is so intimate.

This unnamed woman is breaking cultural norms and violating accepted behavior. And she is admonished by the disciples. But they do not scold her for coming to see Jesus or for touching him. They scold her for wasting the oil, not selling it and giving the money to the poor.

But Jesus defends the woman and what he says is very tender. He says, "Let her alone, why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me."

However, it turns out that may not be precisely what Jesus said. The translation we heard today from the NRSV states that Jesus said, "She has performed a good service for me." But it turns out that is not quite accurate. The original Greek word used here is not "agathos" which means moral correctness, the good and right thing to do. The original Greek word is "kalon" which is different from good and morally right, "kalon" implies something lovely, not something morally correct but something lovely. Jesus' response to the woman should read, "She has done a lovely thing for me." [The woman knows I am at the end of my life. She has done a lovely thing with her spontaneous, extravagant, bold gesture. She understands that I should be anointed before I die. She has done a lovely thing for me.]

Jesus not only accepted and appreciated the lovely thing the woman did for him, he declared that "whenever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." And here we are, 2000 years later, remembering the lovely thing this unnamed woman did for Jesus at the end of his life. Jesus was right. She did a lovely thing. And it will be remembered always.

I believe there is a lesson here for all of us good Christians. I think we strive to do the right and good thing...we know the litany....we are called to be of service, to be generous, to be compassionate, to turn away from sin, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to pray for our enemies, to turn the other cheek, and the list goes on.

We talk about these tenets of our faith, we strive to live up to these values, we work hard to be loving, prayerful, faithful Christians.

But today I want to lift up the memory of this unnamed woman who poured a whole jar of oil on Jesus' head and how he said she did a lovely thing. I want us to think less about the good things we should be doing for God and more about the

lovely things we could be doing for God.

I want us to think less about "I must" and more about "I can."

Less about "I ought to" more about "I get to."

Thinking about doing lovely things for God can reframe our day and our week.  
What lovely things can we do for God this week?

Bishop John Shelby Spong says we are called to "love wastefully." Maybe we can do lovely things for God by loving wastefully.

Maybe doing lovely things for God involves quiet, unnoticed, unthanked deeds that are hidden from human eyes but lovely in God's sight.

But wait...maybe doing lovely things for God also involves grand gestures like using a full jar of expensive oil in a public ritual. Maybe doing lovely things for God does not have one prescribed route....maybe it involves quiet moments and grand gestures and everything in between.

The women who kneel at the Stone of Anointing in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are doing a lovely thing for God. Through a simple ritual that they invented, they are creating holy oil that they use to bless children, comfort elders, soothe, honor, and love others. They are like the woman who anointed Jesus.

Like her, the women who kneel at the Stone of Anointing and pour and then retrieve olive oil are claiming their rightful place as ministers and healers. They are doing something simple and holy. They are doing a lovely thing for God.

Today is Palm Sunday, today we begin Holy Week. We are slowly and mournfully walking toward Maundy Thursday-Jesus' Last Supper and the night of his betrayal; Good Friday-Jesus' pain and torture, his awful walk with the cross, and his crucifixion; Holy Saturday-the darkness, silence and fear. Today we begin a difficult, pensive, prayerful week.

We often enter Holy Week thinking about the end of our Lenten journey, what we gave up, what we think we SHOULD be feeling, what we think we SHOULD be doing.

This year I want us to approach Holy Week differently. Even while we walk with Jesus and prepare for his suffering and mourn his awful death, I want us to find ways to do something lovely for God. Even amidst the pain, sorrow and horror of this week, I want us to step away from what we think we should be doing for God

and think instead about doing something lovely for God.

What might that be? What does it look and feel like to do something lovely for God?

Maybe it is taking a large, fragrant bouquet to place on a table at a homeless shelter...

Maybe it is going to the Springfield bus station and handing out bags of nuts and raisins...

Maybe it is taking a child to skip stones on Paradise Pond...

Maybe it is selling your second home and giving the money away...

Maybe it is cutting off all your hair and giving it to Locks for Love....

Maybe it is visiting a shut-in and singing hymns...

This week I am going to focus less on the horror of the torture, suffering and death and more on doing lovely things for God. I am not jumping over the pain, I am not avoiding Good Friday to hurry on toward Easter, I am thinking about transforming the pain into acts of kindness, doing something lovely for God.

You will think of many lovely things I have not mentioned and could not dream up.

But here's one last idea...one thing we all could do would be to find our own quiet way to take some common olive oil and make it holy. And then anoint a son or daughter to bless them, anoint a sick or grieving friend to comfort them, anoint an elder to soothe them, anoint a family member to show them great love.

This week let's do something lovely for God...

not because we must, but because we may.

Have a blessed Holy Week.

Amen.