

I invite you to go back with me to the very beginning of this morning's Passion Narrative. We hear the story of the woman who breaks open her alabaster jar of ointment and pours it over Jesus.

At the end of this passage, we are told that wherever the good news is told in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.

The word remembrance only occurs a handful of times in the Greek Scriptures. Aside from the Magnificat, this word occurs in the establishment of the Eucharist. Do this in remembrance of me. And here.

So I feel I must tell her story this morning.

We know so little about her. We know nothing of her background, her life. We do not even know her name.

I could, as many have, assume, speculate and embellish. I could even engage in what Will Gafney calls "sanctified imagination." But I feel the point of the author is that I need to insert myself, to invite you to insert yourself, into this narrative, to make this story about you, and about me.

This story, then, is about loving, loving extravagantly. And I want to love extravagantly.

But it's so so hard to love extravagantly, isn't it?

So much of our everyday thinking, our very way of being in this world, is based on a scarcity model. There isn't enough to go around. We feel that we need to hoard love, that we need to hang on to it for dear life. There might not be enough. There might not be enough.

And something even worse than the scarcity model holds us back from loving extravagantly.

Shame.

At some stage in our growing up, many of us, most of us, all of us lose our childhood spontaneity, our fearless vulnerability, our open open hearts.

We surrender to fear of humiliation, embarrassment, and shame.

In our text today, our woman faces down humiliation and embarrassment, shame and fear. She does not flinch. She does not close her heart. She loves, and she loves extravagantly.

I want to be like her, and that is why I am telling you her story today. It should be my story, too.

Our story today, though, has another side.

In Philippians we are told to let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus. So this story of the woman then becomes a story about Jesus as well.

We see Jesus as the person who opens himself to being loved, to being loved extravagantly. Love requires someone to love.

We see Jesus opening his heart, becoming vulnerable, facing down humiliation, embarrassment and shame in order to be loved, loved extravagantly.

And I want to be like Jesus. I know you do, too.

Just this Friday morning, before I started writing this homily, I randomly read an author who said that to love we need to be loved first.

That cracked my heart open a little bit as I prayed through this Passion Narrative. Jesus needed to be loved, be loved extravagantly, first, before he could love, before he could love extravagantly.

That was the gift our woman gave Jesus. The gift that sustained him through the week to come.

It is the gift Jesus gives us. The gift that sustains us even today.

Who needs us to give them that gift? Who needs us to love them extravagantly?

What would we look like if we were about loving extravagantly, and being loved extravagantly?

(Your vestry didn't put it in those terms, but that's the question they were asking all day yesterday. You should be proud of them. They are doing good work.)

I'm talking about extravagant love on Palm Sunday The Sunday of the Passion with Good Friday only a few days away.

And I'm aware that in this context we are likely to associate extravagant love with the Passion of Jesus, with Jesus dying on the Cross.

But I would urge us today to be careful about the ways in which we might associate love with suffering.

Walking the way of the Cross, walking the way of extravagant love, is not to embrace victimization, not to embrace victimhood.

The pain you and I are called to endure is the growing pain of entering into the mind of Christ Jesus. Then we can face down humiliation, embarrassment, shame and victimization. We are called to open our hearts, we are called to vulnerability which surprisingly is where we find strength, the strength to love and be loved, extravagantly.

I rather suspect that the Way of the Cross for you and me is to take our stand with the victims of this world, and to break down the walls of humiliation, embarrassment and shame that separate them from themselves and from their ability to love and be loved. To walk the Way of the Cross means to confront the systems and institutions that make victims and depend on victimization to control us through shame and fear.

Even when those systems and institutions are our own. Especially when those systems and institutions are our own. This is what Stephanie Sellers calls the Cracking Open of the Church.

It's not only our public systems and institutions that thrive on and create shame, though.

How bizarre it is that we learn calculus and trigonometry and dates of battles and names of state capitals in school but never learn about how to love and be loved. It's no wonder that we are caught up in self-perpetuating cycles of shame and fear.

And how tragic is it that Church itself has lent itself to creating and perpetuating cycles of shame and fear. As a young girl growing in a fundamentalist family I was told that Jesus died because I had talked back to my parents. Every night we prayed for the salvation of my uncle's soul. His sin? Living with, and loving a man. This wasn't teaching me to love extravagantly. This wasn't teaching me how to be loved extravagantly. This was teaching me how to live in shame and fear.

So I rather suspect that the Way of the Cross for you and me might also be breaking down the walls of humiliation, embarrassment and shame that separate us from ourselves and from our ability to love and be loved. Ending generational cycles might be how we walk the Way of the Cross.

Now as we move through this week walking the Way of the Cross, we do so in a state of narrative suspense. We don't talk about next Sunday, so that we may enter most fully into the awesome sacred events of this week. That serves a powerful purpose.

But I need to end this sermon by opening the curtain a little bit. I won't be with you next Sunday so I am going to beg forgiveness rather than ask permission to say what comes next.

The Way of the Cross, the marvelous and precious ways in which we love extravagantly this week, the marvelous and precious ways in which we experience being loved extravagantly this week, this way is the way through the Cross, not a Way that ends at the Cross.

I tell you right now. The best example, the perfect model for being loved extravagantly, the best example, the perfect model for loving extravagantly is what

we experience anew next Sunday.

It's God loving so extravagantly that God's Love calls Jesus from death into life. It's Jesus being so open to extravagant love that Jesus is drawn from death into life. Through death into life. And that call extends to you and to me God's call of extravagant love. Not just next Sunday, but here and now.

Let us then, this week and always, walk the way of the Cross. Unflinchingly. Let us together face down shame and separateness, let us move from death, through death, into life in response to God's call of extravagant love. May we open our hearts to love and to being loved.

Extravagantly.

In the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen