

# A Tale of Three Nobodies

a sermon by Rev. J. Mark Worth

**Text: Mark 14:1-11**

## THE SERMON

Over the years our memories, no matter how vivid, may differ from the memories of another person. Mark wrote first, about forty years after the events. He told the story the way he knew it; Matthew told it slightly differently. Luke consulted the best sources available to him, and wrote another version of the events. John, writing about sixty or seventy years after the death of Jesus, told a story quite different from the others. And Thomas wrote down the sayings of Jesus as he remembered them.

But Simon had memories too, for he had been there during the last week of Jesus' life.

**Simon was a nobody.** He was, in fact, less than a nobody; for Simon was an unclean person. He was unclean because of his skin condition, which was seen as a punishment from God, punishment for sin. Well, nobody really knew what his sin was, or even if it was Simon's sin. Maybe it was his parents' sin. But everyone agreed that the disease was God's punishment. He or his parents must have done something dreadful, and now God was punishing Simon.

Simon, we said, was a nobody. He was not known for his profession, because he could not work at a profession. No one would hire him. He was not known for his father or his home town. He was known for his disease, his uncleanliness. He was Simon the Leper.

And so it was very odd that Jesus decided to spend the night with him, on the week leading up to the festival of Unleavened Bread – to be a guest at Simon's home! No one ever came to Simon's house, for to visit the home of a man who was ritually unclean would be to become unclean yourself. But Jesus came to his home anyway. He didn't seem to care that Simon was unclean. Jesus, the great rabbi and healer of Galilee came to his home, the house of Simon the Leper!

For three years or so, ever since the death of John the Baptizer, Jesus had been the subject of much talk. He was stirring up the people, walking a path that showed a spiritual alternative to the brute force of the Roman Empire. Many people said that Jesus was even greater than John, a prophet like those known in Israel's distant past. Of course, some scoffed at Jesus, said he was a drunkard and a glutton, a friend of tax collectors, women, and other sinners. But many said he was a wonder-worker, a persuasive preacher, and the teacher of puzzling parables.

Some even said that he might be the messiah, the man anointed by God to bring justice and restore Israel's greatness. In fact, Jesus and his disciples had been spreading the message, "The kingdom of God is at hand. In God's kingdom the poor will be blessed; the peacemakers will be blessed; those who suffer and those who mourn will be blessed; the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth but people do not see it! If you have eyes, let them see! If you have ears, let them hear!"

Jesus' journey had taken him from Galilee to Bethany to Jerusalem. The Romans were suspicious of him. Those who owed their positions of wealth and power to the Romans, the chief priests and the wealthy landowners, were suspicious of him. The common people loved him. He gave them hope and renewed their faith in God's promise.

**All week Jesus and his disciples** had been staying in Bethany, walking a couple of miles into Jerusalem during the day, and back to Bethany at night. And what a week it had been! On the first day, the day after the Sabbath, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt. Many people were coming to Jerusalem

for the Passover festival, and there were great crowds in the city. Along the way people were shouting “Hosanna” because of the festival; but many shouted “Hosanna” specifically for Jesus, and some proclaimed him the “son of David,,” that is, the Messiah. The crowds were eager to see and hear what this prophet might do or say.

Jesus did not disappoint those who might be looking for a sign. The next day, Jesus and his disciples went to the Temple. They overturned the tables of the moneychangers and those who were selling doves for sacrifice. Jesus quoted Scripture saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers!”

Simon had heard about that. All the people were talking. It was practically a riot. It was a wonder that Jesus was not arrested right away. Maybe Pontius Pilate feared the crowds, feared that if he arrested this prophet the Jews would rebel. Jesus had enemies, but the poor supported him. They knew they were being cheated in the Temple when they went there to sacrifice. But what could they do? The chief priests and the scribes and the Herodian party had the support of Pilate and the Roman garrison. The empire always supports their rich friends – give the tax breaks to the rich, build up the military, and when the deficit grows, they make it up by taking away any benefits that might go to the poor. If the people complain, the empire has troops and crucifixions to enforce the will of Caesar. The poor needed a leader, someone like this man Jesus.

As bold as Jesus was, chances were that he would not last long against the Romans and their collaborator friends. There was talk among the people that the priests and their friends were looking for a chance to kill Jesus, but probably not until the Passover was over, because of the crowds. Jesus had popular support, and so it seemed that he was safe for now. But perhaps he acted too boldly for his own safety.

**That week Jesus and his disciples** had been staying in Bethany at the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. Simon knew Mary and Martha. Jesus treated the women as if they were the equals of men. Mary and Martha introduced Jesus to Simon. Simon had stood back, afraid to come forward. He knew that people did not want to get close, afraid that he would touch them. But Jesus called to him. When Simon stayed back, Jesus came toward him. Then Jesus clasped Simon’s hand, and put his other hand on Simon’s shoulder, and kissed him on both cheeks. “My friends Mary and Martha tell me you are a good man with a kind heart,” Jesus said. “I would like to get to know you. May I stay at your house tonight?”

Simon was flabbergasted. Jesus had touched him! Jesus had kissed him! What kind of man of God was this, a man who was not afraid of his uncleanness? And Jesus asked to stay at his house! He wanted to be a guest in the home of a leper! What kind of man was he? Simon had heard that Jesus kept odd company. He eats and drinks with sinners! Simon had heard a story about a wedding party in Cana, where Jesus brought the finest wine. This Galilean must be crazy – or he must really be a man of God, someone not afraid to treat all people as worthy of the kingdom of God – to treat even a leper as a child of God.

And now here he was, the famous Jesus of Galilee, in Simon’s home. And not just Jesus, but his whole entourage, for he brought his disciples, twelve men and a number of women disciples as well. Simon had arranged for a great meal. Jesus, a gracious guest, brought the wine.

And then, before they ate, something happened.

**She was a nobody.** She was, in fact, less than a nobody, for she was a women. Simon did not know who she was, or who had invited her. But she had an alabaster jar full of nard, a fragrant and expensive ointment. She said nothing, but broke open the jar, and before anyone could stop her she poured ointment on Jesus’ head.

Everyone was stunned – for everyone knew the meaning of this sign. Jesus had been anointed with oil, just as King David was anointed by the prophet Samuel – just as all the Hebrew kings had been anointed. The anointed ones, the royal messiahs, had been the kings who led Israel and Judah. But in this day there was no Jewish king, no messiah, not even a Roman puppet king since Herod “the Great” had died. Now there was just Caesar and the Roman governors.

The woman who had anointed Jesus had committed a political act. She had proclaimed Jesus to be King of the Jews, the one who would restore justice to the land – the one who would usher in the kingdom of God, where there would be no oppression of the poor, where everyone would be treated as an equal, a worthy child of God. God’s kingdom would not be like the empire where the rich got richer and the poor got crucified. God’s peace would not be like the Pax Romana, imposed on the people by the legions and paid for with heavy taxes on those who could least afford it. The kingdom of God would be a kingdom of peace through justice, and all of Israel longed for that day. Many hoped for God’s messiah, the man who would lead the people in righteousness and restore David’s throne. Had that moment finally arrived?

Many who were there protested. Judas, one of the Twelve, protested loudly. “That oil must have cost 300 denarii,” he grumbled. “That’s nearly a year’s wages for a poor man. Why was this oil wasted? We could have sold it and distributed the money to the poor!”

But Jesus said, “Yes, we could have sold it. Whenever you will, you should help those who are poorer than you are. The poor will always be with you – but you will not always have me. This woman has confessed her faith through her generosity. Do not deny her that act of faith. She has performed a brave act, an important service. She has anointed my head with oil. What is the meaning of this sign, Judas?”

Judas sputtered, “I don’t know what you want. Your questions are as confusing as your answers. You spend your time in the company of nobodies. Sometimes I think your path takes us to Jerusalem – so that you will be the king we all hope for – and sometimes I think your path will lead only to suffering and crucifixion for us all. Is this the anointing of the king, or just another dinner party? It’s time to either act, or go back to carpentry. Are you ready to meet your destiny? When word of this anointing gets out, the Romans will be after you! If you do not act decisively, then this woman has anointed your body for burial!”

“If that is so,” said Jesus, “then let it be so. My life is in God’s hands. But truly I tell you, this woman has done a great deed, and wherever the good news of God’s realm is proclaimed, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

“How shall I remember her,” thought Simon, “when I do not even know her name? Who is she? She is a nobody, like me.”

**And Judas went out.** He had been angry for some time. Jesus was not the kind of messiah he had wanted, not the king he had expected. Sometimes Jesus *did* seem to be the messiah. He spoke with power and authority. The people were willing to follow him. But why was there no talk about revolution? Why weren’t they gathering an army? Would God send legions of angels? There were too many riddles, too many parables, not enough clear answers. “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.” Judas still didn’t understand that one! If Jesus would only engage in more action, like at the Temple the other day, and waste less time dealing with nobodies like women and lepers, the disciples could get to the business of establishing a *real* kingdom where Judas and the other eleven would be in charge.

After all, Jesus had said, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” “I’ve been last long enough,” Judas thought, “I want a place at the head of the table. Whether it’s next to Jesus or next to the High Priest I don’t care anymore. It’s time to force Jesus’ hand. Either he is God’s man, or he is

just another nobody. It's time to find out. If he really is God's anointed one, let's start the revolution. If God is on our side, the Romans can't stand up to an army of God's angels. I'll force Jesus to act. Then we'll see if he is the messiah or just another nobody."

So Judas went to the priests and said, "Do you want Jesus arrested? I will lead you to him. I will pick a time and place where there are no crowds to protect him. Bring the Romans."

**Jesus said, "Whenever the good news is proclaimed, what this woman has done will be told in remembrance of her."** It is ironic that we know the name of the man who betrayed Jesus, and we know the name of the man who denied Jesus, but we don't know the name of the woman who anointed him messiah. She was a nobody after all. In some churches today she still can't be a pastor or a priest because she's not of the right gender, as if that's at all relevant.

Now the poor are still with us, and we still have a duty to help all we can. And the Caesars are still with us, building their empires on the backs of those who can afford it the least, cutting the Low Income Heating Assistance Program but giving tax breaks to the wealthy class, building up military budgets but cutting Veterans' benefits.

But hope is still with us, also. Compassion is still with us. Acts of devotion are still with us. And although he is no longer with us in the flesh, the spirit of Jesus is with us as well.

In fact, you are invited to a party. You are invited to a banquet at the home of Simon the Leper. All of you are invited, regardless of your particular uncleanness, for you see, we all have our faults, our imperfections, our fallible nature. We are all human, and have fallen short of the perfection of God. We have all done the wrong thing at times.

It doesn't matter to Jesus. He won't ask you your political affiliation. He won't ask which church you belong to. He won't ask what creed you say on Sunday morning. He won't ask whether you are gay or straight, Jew or Christian or Muslim or humanist, male or female, American or Iraqi. He won't require you to have a Ph.D. or even a high school diploma. He doesn't care whether you are living with leprosy or AIDS. He doesn't ask whether you live in Bangor, Blue Hill, Boston, Baghdad or Basra. He doesn't care whether you are young or old, or have money or not. He doesn't care that you've never been on TV, because his ministry is a ministry to the nobodies. And he doesn't care that you are a nobody, because at God's banquet table every nobody is a somebody. Everyone is worthy, everyone is welcome, everyone is invited to the party, because everyone is a child of God.

Jesus, a nobody from the unimportant town of Nazareth, in the unimportant region of Galilee, is giving a banquet. If you are a nobody, you are invited. Just follow Jesus' footsteps to the home of Simon the Leper. You can bring a jar of nard if you like. Or not. Jesus is bringing the wine.

Amen.