

Extravagant Love

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Mark 14:1-11

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

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Crime shows fare well on television according to the most recent Nielson Ratings. I counted six crime shows among its list of the top 20 TV shows. CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) is now the most popular TV show on the planet.

So, guess what? We can anticipate that the major networks will continue to dole out new crime shows to appease our justice-weary souls.

Those who watch crime shows are likely familiar with the three ingredients necessary to reach a guilty verdict in any court of law: means, motive and opportunity. First, a means must be established with the accused. Does this potential perpetrator possess the means and capacity to commit the crime? Does this person own a murder weapon or have access to one? Second, there must be a causal link with the accused in regard to motive. Does the perpetrator display a motive to commit the crime? Is this person vindictive or jealous of the crime victim? Third, the alleged perpetrator must also display an opportunity to commit the crime. Was this person alone with the victim when the crime occurred?

All three ingredients to a crime have been put into play in this murder mystery in Mark's gospel. The religious leaders exhibit the motive, while Judas supplies the means and the opportunity.

Mark likes to tell a story within a story. This sandwich technique is common in Mark's gospel. You might compare this passage to an Oreo cookie with its crème filling sandwiched between two circular chocolate pieces or a hot pastrami sandwich between two slices of rye.

Mark begins by telling a story in verses 1-2 about a scheme by the religious authorities to arrest Jesus by stealth. Then Mark seemingly breaks away from this drama in verses 3-9 to tell a seemingly unrelated story about a woman who lavishes extravagant devotion on Jesus. Then Mark returns once again to this murder mystery story in verses 10-11 by reporting that one of Jesus' original 12 disciples, Judas, possesses both the means and opportunity to betray Jesus.

Between these two somber scenes of plotting and betrayal, Mark places this starkly contrasting story of loving devotion. We read, in verse 3, that

Those whom we would regard as insiders get it wrong while the outsiders get it right.

Jesus and his disciples are reclining at the table of Simon the leper. Simon must already be healed of his leprosy; otherwise he wouldn't be hosting this dinner party.

An unnamed woman appears out of nowhere. Her unannounced appearance at this all-male gathering would have been scandalous in Jesus' day. She carries an alabaster flask filled with exotic perfume. Nard is the most expensive perfume of the day, imported from India.

She anoints Jesus' head with the perfume. Her act of touching Jesus is another social faux pas. His disciples resent her lavish display and claim this valuable perfume is being wasted. It could have been sold in the market and fetched a year's worth of wages, with the proceeds given to the poor.

Jesus speaks for the first time in verse 6, "Let her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing for me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them anytime you want. But you will not always have me." This verse about the poor is one of the most misunderstood passages of Scripture. Jesus is not encouraging a callous disregard for the poor. He talks often about our Christian responsibility toward the poor. Rather, he emphasizes her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to perform something beautiful.

This woman must be unaware of the implications of this anointing. Jesus raises the bar in verse 8 by interpreting her actions prophetically. While the religious leaders plot to put Jesus to death, this unnamed woman anoints Jesus' body for burial.

"Truly, I tell you," Jesus says, "whenever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." Her name may not be remembered, but here we are, twenty centuries later, still recalling her magnanimous gesture of devotion.

Everything is turned upside down in this story. The religious leaders and Judas conspire to put Jesus to death, while this unnamed woman performs the most extravagant act of devotion, and thereby unknowingly prepares him for burial. I tell you, the irony is unmistakable. Those whom we would regard as insiders, religious authorities and disciples, get it wrong, while this unnamed woman in the house of a leper, outsiders, get it right.

The religious leaders and even Jesus' disciples call what this woman did "a waste" in verse 4. Yet, Jesus interprets her gesture as something "beautiful" in verse 6. Now, which is it? Either what she did was a ridiculous waste of resources or something extraordinarily beautiful.

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A prospective groom buys an expensive ring for his would-be bride. Parents invest considerable life savings in educating their children. A grown son or daughter gives inordinate amounts of time and money to care for aging parents. Is their gesture wasteful or beautiful?

To the economist, beauty doesn't balance the books. To the pragmatist, beauty isn't particularly useful. To the activist, beauty doesn't advance the cause. Yet, what they are doing is altogether beautiful to the recipient.

Sometimes we lavish devotion on Jesus merely to derive things from him. We're tempted to follow Jesus in order to receive benefits from him; tangible resources like health, wealth and prosperity. But this woman demonstrates an aesthetic reason for lavishing devotion on Jesus. We praise him for the sheer beauty of who he is and what he has done in our lives.

Today, we are confirming 40 young people into membership in our church. We are inviting you not only to join us in following Jesus' teaching, but to actually love Jesus and devote your life to him.

If you decide to love Jesus and devote your life to him, let me forewarn you; following Jesus isn't necessarily cool. In fact, it will put you at odds with what your peers think is cool.

Everybody aspires today to look cool and act cool. I don't know who gets to decide what is cool. Is there a coolness posse out there to determine what is cool and what is not? Yet, there is a coolness standard operating out there by which we measure ourselves.

Clever marketers know that nothing increases sales like the coolness factor. Marketers want to portray their product as cool in the eyes of their customers. It doesn't matter if you have the best product on the market. If your product doesn't create brand buzz, customers won't be buying.

Del Breckenfeld, Director of Marketing for Fender Musical Instruments, explores in his book *The Cool Factor* how his company aggressively marketed their guitar's cool factor. Breckenfeld chronicles how Fender used cool celebrity musicians to transform their product into the world's best selling guitar. Nothing increases sales like the cool factor. I am by no means a connoisseur of today's popular rock and roll bands. Yet, I've made it a point to study their promotional material. Is it just my imagination or are these bands trying desperately to create a certain look? Are they trying to look a certain way to increase their band's cool factor?

Why do people knock themselves out to pursue the latest

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electronic devices? Maybe the coolness factor has something to do with it. I don't want to be perceived as being out of it. I want to appear relevant and up-to-date. Now that you have mounted your new, high definition flat screen TV, when are you going to switch to a HD-3 or HD-4 model?

Did you know you can go on-line and rate your car's coolness factor? The mean score falls into a range of 52-101. My 10-year-old car has a coolness factor of 24. I read the comments associated with my car. Imagine my horror when I read that people will likely make fun of my car.

Following Jesus probably isn't cool at the high school you attend nor is following Jesus chic to vast sectors of American life. People don't attend church any longer because it's the cool thing to do.

There was a time when we could rely on our wider culture to support our Christian convictions and values. When I came to this church in 1979, the Judeo-Christian ethic was embraced by everybody, or so it seemed. I would never dare say that today. We can, as Christians, no longer rely on our wider secular culture for support. Following Jesus has become counter-cultural. We're now swimming against the current.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not bemoaning our minority status as Christians. Actually, I regard it as a distinct advantage. We have the unique opportunity to offer people a viable alternative to a secular way of life. Living in relationship with God is mysterious to many people with a secular orientation, but it's also appealing. People are tired of living strictly at the horizontal dimension. They want to live for something greater than themselves. People today are aspiring to live for transcendent purposes.

Is following Jesus a waste of time and money or something beautiful? You get to decide, but decide you will in the way you order your life. Do in your life something beautiful for God.

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