

2 August 2015

Remember Me

Mark 14

It's already been a long Passover week for Jesus, the teacher from Nazareth, and it's only Tuesday. He and his friends have spent every day in Jerusalem, where he's been attacked all day by priests and scribes and others trying to discredit him before the crowds. He's dealt with every question – though not always by answering them – and at last his enemies have backed off. He was smarter than they were and kept making them look like privileged, self-interested hypocrites. They had no choice now: Jesus had to die.

Meanwhile, out in the neighboring town of Bethany, Jesus and his friends are eating at the home of a certain Simon the leper. While Jesus is reclining at the table, a woman appears, standing uncertainly at his feet. Jesus looks at her and smiles. “Yes, daughter?”

The woman begins to cry. Slowly the room grows silent. then the woman reaches into her clothes and pulls out a beautiful alabaster flask and steps up behind Jesus. Tears still streaming, she snaps the top off the flask and pours the contents over his head. The room is filled with the fragrance of nard, among the most costly of perfumes. She empties the flask, still weeping.

“You can't be serious,” says a voice. “Do you have any idea what we could have gotten for that much nard?”

“Not to mention the bottle that she ruined,” adds another.

“Woman, what are you thinking? There are poor people that need to be fed.”

“Homeless people who need shelter!”

“Of all the *criminal* wastes of resources!”

“Leave her alone!” says Jesus. “What, do you think you're going to solve poverty? Cure all the world's ills? Fix society? What are *you* thinking? Let me tell you what this woman has done. She has anointed my body for burial. She alone, of every person who follows me, seems to understand that. Sometimes you give to help solve a problem; sometimes you give because you can't *not* give. What this woman has done will be remembered forever.”

That's the last straw for Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve. He has followed Jesus all this time, waiting for him to finally step up and take action. He's endured all Jesus' gloomy predictions that he'll be killed. But this is too much. If Jesus won't be *practical*, someone else will have to. He leaves that night and goes to the priests, offering to send them word when Jesus can be found away from the crowds. And they settle on a price.

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The Passover is finally here, and Jesus' friends ask him where he's planning to celebrate the feast: here in Bethany or in Jerusalem? Jesus sends two of them into the city. "When you get into the city, you'll see a man carrying a jar of water. Follow him to his house, and when you get there, ask him where the upper room is where we can observe the Passover." The two friends do as he says, see the man, ask the question, and he shows them the room, already furnished.

As they walk back to Bethany, one of them says to the other: "So is this, like, a miracle? Or did Jesus just work it out ahead of time with that guy?"

The other looks at him. "I have no clue."

Whatever the case, though, it's a perfect place. The Twelve, along with others who had followed him closely, converge on the upper room, prepare the meal, set the table, then gather for the sacred feast with their Lord.

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At the meal, Jesus looks around at his friends. His face is still. "You know, it's not as easy to share this meal as I had expected. One of you sitting at table with me is about to betray me."

His words cause an immediate outcry, as each friend – especially Judas – loudly declares that whoever it is, it isn't *him*. Then they begin looking suspiciously at each other. Jesus says, "All of you here are sharing bread and oil with me. All of you share the bitter herbs. But one of you betrays me. And to that one I say, 'I am sorry for you, but I could not be who you wanted me to be.'"

He takes the bread of the feast in his hands, then breaks it. He has done this before. They have seen him break bread for thousands. But this time it is just for them. He hands it around. "Eat this bread; it is my body."

Then he takes the wine, pours it into the cup, and says, "This is my blood, and by this blood I seal a new covenant. This blood is poured out not for a few, but for many. This is the last time I will drink wine with you; will you remember this night?"

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After the meal, Jesus and his friends sing a Passover hymn, then go out into the night. Jesus seems distracted. He leads them to a garden called Gethsemane, where he's already taken them several times this week. He likes to pray among the trees. As they near the familiar garden, Judas Iscariot disappears. Nobody notices.

In the garden, Jesus calls his friends together and says, "Tonight you will all be scattered like sheep. But I will not desert you. After I'm raised, I'll meet you in Galilee."

They still don't know what he's talking about when he says he'll be raised, but they hear the part about being scattered. "Not me!" declares Simon Peter. "*This* guy might desert you, or *that* one, but I never will!"

"Peter," Jesus says sadly. "Before the night's over, before the cock crows twice, you will deny three times that you even know me." Peter protests, even more loudly, but Jesus just continues. "Peter, James, John, come with me. The rest of you stay here."

In silence, he takes the three to the darkest part of the garden. "I'm not sure I can do this," he says suddenly. "Will you stay near?" The three assure him they will. "Thank you. I'm going to go off alone for a while. Stay here. Stay awake for me."

Quietly, Jesus disappears into the shadows. There he kneels. "Abba? Father? I don't want to do this. I don't want to drink this cup. I'm afraid of the pain. Is there any other way?" The silence is heavy and deep. "All right," Jesus says to the shadow, "Your will be done. Not mine."

Standing, he returns to Peter, James, and John. They're sound asleep. "You couldn't stay awake with me tonight? Of all nights?"

Sleepily, they mumble their apologies. Jesus turns and walks back into the darkness. "Are you sure, Father? We're leaving it with *them*? Surely there's another . . . I mean, surely . . . all right. Your will be done. Not mine."

He goes back to the three. He has to wake them up again. In fact, it all actually happens once more. A *third* time Jesus comes and finds them asleep, but by then, it's over. A rustling in the brush, and there's Judas. "Teacher!" he cries, kissing him on the cheek. "I've been looking for you!"

And then the whole garden is filled with noise, as the temple guards appear, waving their swords and spears. There are cries of "Halt! Nobody move!" and "You're under arrest!" Some of Jesus' friends resist; one even manages to draw a sword and offer a token resistance, but the guards are too many. Jesus is bound before his friends' eyes, and when the guards look around to see who else is there, all Jesus' friends have disappeared in the darkness. The only person left is one young man, whom nobody knows, whom the guards find in the undergrowth watching. They grab at his clothes, but he slips out of them and runs away, naked in the darkness.

Now we remember our own betrayals. We remember when we have slept through another's need, hidden from another's distress, run away from the path of integrity. We pray now in silence.

This week, God, we have done badly:

We have been impatient with those we love,

Ignored those we didn't know,

Thought first of ourselves far more often than we have thought of others.

O Lord have mercy.

This week, O Lord, we have not done well:

We could have checked on the person we knew was in distress, but we didn't.
We promised to pray for someone, then never gave it another thought.
We convinced ourselves that the best way to help someone was to leave them alone and not get involved ourselves – because it was way easier for us.

O Lord have mercy.

And even before we ask, your mercy has been given.

In the bread that is your body, you have been gracious

In the blood of the new covenant, you have cleansed our sins.

In the promise of resurrection, you renew us.

Thanks be to God.

In gratitude for God's mercy through his Son, we pray the prayer that the Son taught us:

Our Father . . .

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All the friends run away. Peter, though, doesn't go far. Once he's away, he circles back and follows the guards. They take Jesus to the high priest's house, and Peter slips quietly into the courtyard before the gate closes. Jesus is inside the house itself and the doors are closed, but with an air of confidence, Peter steps up to the fire in the courtyard where the guards are warming their hands.

Inside, the priests are frustrated. They thought they had the trial all arranged, with false witnesses bought and paid for, but it had all been done in a hurry, and none of the witnesses' stories agree. This is a problem, you see. The Law of Moses requires at least two confirming witnesses, and while the priests don't mind rigging a trial and sending a man to death, they won't break the Law of Moses. That would be wrong. Finally, the high priest stands and demands, "*Are you the Christ?*"

"I Am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power."

"Oh," says the high priest. "Well, that's good enough, isn't it? Isn't that blasphemy? I think it's blasphemy!" And he tears his robe to show how distressed he is, then hands Jesus over to be beaten by the guards.

Meanwhile, out in the courtyard, a servant girl frowns at Peter. "Say, didn't I see you with Jesus of Nazareth?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Peter turns his face away from the fire as a cock crows to signal the dawn.

"No, I mean it! I'm sure I saw you with him! Guys, this is one of Jesus' followers!"

"I ain't neither!"

Another servant sniffs. “Yes, he says that, but listen to that Galilean accent. He’s got to be one of them.”

“I tell you, I don’t know him!”

The cock crows again, and a wave of remembrance sweeps over Peter. This is what Jesus had said he would do. He had denied knowing the man who had delivered his life from emptiness. At dinner, Jesus had said, “Remember me.” But Peter had not. He hadn’t stayed awake in the garden. He hadn’t stood beside him in his danger. He hadn’t remembered.

Peter flees into the darkness, weeping.