***“ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL”***

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on January, 12, 2025*

*based on Mark 14:1-9*

*Everyone knows the term, Seven Wonders of the Ancient World*. But who can name them?

A list of the Seven Wonders was originally compiled around the second century BC (long ago). The final list was compiled during the [Middle Ages](http://dir.yahoo.com/Regional/Regions/Europe/Arts_and_Humanities/Humanities/History/By_Time_Period/Middle_Ages/).

The list comprises the seven most impressive architectural monuments of the [Ancient World](http://www.julen.net/aw/), some of which barely survived to the Middle Ages. Listed in order of their construction, the seven wonders are: the [Great Pyramid of Giza](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Pyramid_of_Giza). The [Hanging Gardens of Babylon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanging_Gardens_of_Babylon). The [Statue of Zeus at Olympia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue_of_Zeus_at_Olympia). The [Temple of Artemis at Ephesus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Artemis). The [Mausoleum of Maussollos at Halicarnassus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mausoleum_of_Maussollos). The [Colossus of Rhodes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colossus_of_Rhodes). The [Lighthouse of Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lighthouse_of_Alexandria), Egypt.

All but the Great Pyramid are gone, destroyed either by earthquake or …. fire.

Two thousand years ago, people of any means at all would tour these sights, and you will not be surprised to hear there were hawkers of souvenirs who would set up shop just outside the wonders and sell facsimiles, along with guide books to the other sights.

A small replica of the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Greece that is at least 1800 years old was found in Afghanistan not long ago. That gives you some sense of how far people traveled in those days.

Afghanistan. That’s’ where a certain rare and valuable ointment made for beauty and preservation came from. Nard, it is called in this morning’s scripture text. It is probably the only thing of value owned by this nameless woman in today’s story from Mark’s gospel. A woman, Jesus says, who will be remembered as long as stories are told.

A human wonder of the world, and yet we don’t even know her name. “I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her,” says Jesus.

But that day no one had a clue what she was doing, besides Jesus and the woman herself. She fetches this obviously priceless jar of ointment, breaks the seal on it, and slathers it all, ALL on Jesus.

"What a waste," the disciples say. "This expensive perfume (in an alabaster jar from exotic Afghanistan) could have been sold for plenty, and the proceeds given to the poor."

They are giving Jesus a lecture on ethics, on love. “That money should go into the mission budget” they say. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

Tradition says that “the devil” gave Jesus a similar lecture once, when after his baptism, the Holy Spirit whisked Jesus out into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights.

The devil came and tempted him to turn stones into bread, remember? Not because Jesus was hungry, so much as because the world was full of hungry people.

The Christian thing would be to feed them, wouldn't it? That would be the sensible thing to do. Take care of the hunger problem of the poor masses.

Forget the preaching and the stuff about the abundant life. Be sensible Feed the hungry." Any other use of valuable resources is a waste.

Jesus answered the devil with this: "Human beings live by more than bread alone.” People have a hunger for more than bread. You can give them all the nutrients and vitamins and minerals and Ozempic every day for life, but people need more, they need other things to live, really live.

To the disciples Jesus says, "This woman has done something [kalon] to me.”

Something good that shines like the sun. Something BEAUTIFUL

She has given all she has, all she is.

It is both beautiful and preposterous

We humans have a taste for the beautifully preposterous. Deep in our bones:

I mean, look, why couldn’t the woman with the jar of ointment just say to Jesus that she was sorry he would soon be dead?

Explaining her action to the disciples Jesus says, “She has done something so beautiful it will be remembered for as long as humans have memory.”

The philosopher, Francis Bacon is remembered to have pointed out that in all beauty there is some strangeness of proportion. Think of it. Something out of sync; like eyes so large and so dark they don’t quite fit the face they are set in – but how beautiful.

The disciples would certainly argue that what they were recommending they were recommending out of love. Love for humanity. But for Jesus what they thought of as love, wasn’t love, exactly. And if it was love, it was a *calculating* kind of love.

In what is called the Bible's “Love chapter,” 1st Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul tells us about people who make grand gestures, giving away all that they have, or even giving their bodies to be burned (as martyrs) but who are NOT motivated by love.

Paul suggests, they do what they do to attract attention, to qualify for an eternal reward, maybe. Or to make flaming martyrs of themselves, but not for love, not like this woman whose cup overflows.

Her beautiful loving gesture is the Christian answer to the fundamentalist suicidal car murderer in New Orleans and also, the MAGA nut suicide bomber in Las Vegas, this past month. The ultimate religious sacrifice is NOT to become a suicide bomber of any sort. That is a counterfeit.

But the woman’s demonstration of love in this morning’s text seems to Jesus’ disciples to be just so much foolishness in the face of a starving world. And it is.

But then love, real love, is often foolish.

Oswald Goltier was a Presbyterian missionary to China in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. He was tireless – too dedicated for his own good. After serving there for twenty years without a single break, the Presbyterian Mission Board insisted he take a furlough home to the US. He got on a freighter and headed west. The ship docked in Mumbai, India for a short stop, and, along with everyone else, he temporarily disembarked while the ship was re-supplied.

Now, it’s important for you to know that the time was 1946. Wandering the docks, Goltier stumbled upon a warehouse full of Jews, a group of people no one anywhere was willing to allow into their country.

They had survived the Holocaust but the question was, would they survive their survival. The world was saying – “There’s no room.”

I use the words “no room” because it so happened that it was Christmas Eve. Now, Goltier took pity on them. He sold back his ticket to the United States – bought a return ticket to China, and used the balance of the money to buy the approximately 100 stranded Jews -- German pastry.

Where he got it, I don’t know, but his granddaughter is a friend of mine, and she confirmed the story.

When he told a woman he had traveled with on the freighter that he was headed back to China and had used the money to buy Christmas pastries for stranded Jews, she was gobsmacked. The woman said, “They’re Jews! They don’t even BELIEVE in Christmas.”

And Oswald Goltier said, “Yes, I know . . . but I do.”

Something both preposterous and beautiful.

The disciples are just like the woman who scoffed in disbelief. They don't realize the timeliness of this woman's extravagant gift. She gives all she has, just as Jesus is on his way to give all he has, all he is – choosing once and for all to NOT return evil for evil..

The cross.

Years ago when I was pastoring in Ashland, a local rabbi and friend, Marc Sirinski, and I swapped pulpits. One of his congregants told me how much it had meant to him to see his Rabbi preaching in our church with the cross behind him. He said that he had previously viewed the cross as “a gory thing.” But now, after that Sunday, he was able to see it as something beautiful.

Near the end of his life, Pope John Paul II (remember the Polish pope?) took his Parkinson riddled body to Jerusalem. To see him totter unassisted to the western wall of the old temple, and to be so dwarfed by it, was something beautiful.

The day before he had gone to Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial. If anyone wondered if his apology for 2000 years of crimes against Jews did not include the Holocaust they were wrong. There in the temple wall he put his prayer of apology .

This man who had been anything but a liberal pope, standing there, his left hand trembling. He looked very small in front of those massive stones, the remnants of Herod’s tremendous structure (the 8th Wonder of the Ancient World, maybe).

Well, for my money, that little stooped, sick, Polish man never stood any taller. Standing there, all by himself, representing us, and all our Christian forebears.

There IS such a thing as moral beauty, you know. Sometimes you can actually *feel* that kind of beauty.

The mystic, Hildegard of Bigen once said that being human is partly about feeling the radiance of beautiful things.

“And while [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.”

You know, when this nameless woman does this, Jesus is no longer alone in his death.

Remember his admonition to the disciples: “The poor you will always have with you and when you want you can do good to them, but you will not always have me.” Can you hear the loneliness in that?

“But you will not always have me.”

It is so like Tolstoy’s story, THE DEATH OF IVAN ILLYCH. The rich man, Ivan Illych, is dying and his family cannot bring themselves to recognize this or even speak of it.

To them it is unthinkable. They are just too close to him, too dependent on him, like Jesus’ disciples are in relation to Jesus. Only Ivan’s paid servant, a young man named, Gerasim, is able to recognize the inevitable. He knows Ivan is dying and is not afraid to mention this to his master. In doing so, he becomes Ivan’s life-line.

To the disciples, Jesus says, "This woman has done something [beautiful] to me.”

Beauty is God’s unique signature upon the earth.

Japanese Zen artists have spoken for hundreds of years about how things of pure beauty communicate to humans something of home. We feel “received” by the purely beautiful.

Jesus feels received by this woman in the midst of feeling abandoned by his disciples. She, in turn, expresses through her extravagant actions that she knows there is nothing this man would hold back, not even his life.

Now after it was all over, after the whole dinner party had disbursed; after the whirlwind of the next three days -- the last supper and the crucifixion, I wonder if Simon the leper who had invited Jesus home with him, might have found some hardened drops of nard there by the low table where they had eaten. The woman had poured it with abandon, remember?

I wonder what he would have thought there about Jesus’ words – I wonder if he had remembered this nameless woman’s grand gesture; seen the beauty in it?

Such a small thing, easy to miss, unless you have eyes that are hungry for beauty.

I want to close the sermon with a short poem of Sharon Olds called, “Little Things.”

After she has gone to camp, in the early

evening I clear [my daughter] Liddy’s breakfast dishes

from the rosewood table, and find a small

crystallized pool of maple syrup, the

grains standing there, round, in the night, I

rub it with my fingertip

as if I could read it, this raised dot of

amber sugar, and this time

When I think of my father, I wonder why

I think of my father, of the beautiful blood red

glass in his hand, or his black hair gleaming like a

broken-open coal. I think I learned to

love the little things about him

because of all the big things

I could not love, no one could, it would be wrong to.

So when I fixed on this tiny image of resin

Or sweep together with the heel of my hand a

pile of my son’s sunburn peels like

‘insect wings, where I peeled his back the night before camp

I am doing something I learned early to do, I am

Paying attention to small beauties,

Whatever I have as if it were our duty to

Find things to love, to bind ourselves to this world.

Amen