

Instead of Me

Message #1 – “Anointed for Me”
Matthew 26:1-13

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
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*When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ² “**You know** that after two days the **Passover** is coming, and the Son of Man **will be handed over to be crucified.**” ³ Then the **chief priests** and the **elders of the people** gathered in the palace of the **high priest**, who was called Caiaphas, ⁴ and they **conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.** ⁵ But they said, “**Not during the festival**, or there may be a riot among the people.”*

*⁶ Now while Jesus was at Bethany **in the house** of Simon the **leper**, ⁷ a **woman** came to him with an alabaster jar of very **costly** ointment, and she poured it **on his head** as he sat at the table. ⁸ But when the **disciples** saw it, they were **angry** and said, “**Why this waste?**” ⁹ For this ointment could have been sold **for a large sum**, and the **money given to the poor.**” ¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “**Why do you trouble the woman?** She has performed a good service for me. ¹¹ For **you always have the poor with you**, but **you will not always have me.**” ¹² By pouring this ointment on my body **she has prepared me for burial.** ¹³ Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told **in remembrance of her.**” (Matthew 26:1-13)*

So, I have a confession to make. This past week I went to buy donuts at Beiler’s Donut Shop in Lancaster. I was coming home from a meeting and I was going to surprise Kristine with a special treat for Fasnacht Day and so I stopped in to get a couple of our favorites. Right there at the counter, while I was checking out, they had individually packaged doggie donuts. That’s right—even the dog could get a donut at Beiler’s. Well, I picked it up and I asked the clerk how much it was. She said, \$3.50. I seriously thought about it, but ended up putting it back on the counter while saying out loud – but mostly to myself – “No, I’d better not get that.” What I didn’t say out loud, but what was going on in my mind, was that Sophie, our dog, had been experiencing bouts of colitis – so I was not planning on adding anything to her diet that was going to then come back on me later. Well, as I started paying for my donuts, the woman in line behind me said, “Hey, I’ll pay for that doggie donut for your dog.” I began to say, “thank you, but...” But she immediately interrupted me and started going through her wallet saying, “No, your dog needs to have a treat too... and I want to do that for you... you can just pay it forward.” I started to reply again, “Thank you, but...” – but she interrupted me again, insisting that I could just “pay it forward” for someone else. It was only after I finally got a word in that I was able to explain that my dog was dealing with colitis, but that I appreciated her kind gesture.

I exited the store with my donuts and a rather unique feeling. You see, usually, I'm the one who pays it forward... doing something nice for someone else. I've been the guy who's bought lunches for people, or anonymously stepped in and paid fines for people... But that day, I was on the receiving end. Or actually, my dog was.

"Paying it forward." Now that's a phrase that we haven't heard for a while. But the concept of doing something for someone else -- offering to cover a cost, buying someone's lunch, paying for the lunches in the car behind you at the Chick-fil-A drive thru... those acts of kindness really do make us stop and think.

Do you know what my doggie donut lady made me think? She made me realize that the one central thing that makes paying it forward a powerful chaos-interrupter is... you ready for this? ... Empathy. That's right—empathy. Empathy is the capacity to put ourselves into another person's shoes, into another person's experience.

My all-time, absolute favorite book (besides the Bible) is Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. I have read that book so many times over the years. And every time I read it, I learn something new, something more... and it convicts me and blesses me simultaneously. If you haven't read it, do yourself a favor and read it – and allow its words to seep into every cell of your being. Well, there's a specific quote from that book – a quote that is said by Atticus Finch to his young child, Scout, that, to me, is the best definition of empathy. This is what Atticus says to Scout:

"If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

Empathy. You really get to know a person when you "climb inside of their skin and walk around in it."

In Bible language I call that "incarnational leadership." The gospel accounts tell us about a God who came to humanity *as a human*. God took the initiative, took on flesh, and "tabernacled" (John 1:14 TLV) with us. Jesus, the Son of God, the Lord of life, entered into a human body and into human culture. His words were spoken with a human mouth. His deeds were done with his own human hands. He laughed with people on the hillsides. He ate with those his social structures told him not to. He reached out to touch the untouchable. He hugged lepers. He danced at weddings. He washed other people's feet. And he walked slowly through the crowds—ultimately leading to his own death as "*a ransom for many*" (**Mark 10:45**). And he asked his followers to do the same.

Incarnational leaders enter into wherever people are, whatever they are dealing with, to bring a message of hope and new life—and to move those people toward it.

And that's what Jesus did. For us. His birth in a stable, His life, His teaching, His way of interacting with common, ordinary people, the way He held the religious

leaders accountable on behalf of those they were supposed to be leading, His suffering at the hands of His persecutors, His crucifixion and death on the cross... It was all for us. He climbed inside of our skin and walked around in it...

But not everyone appreciated what Jesus did... or who Jesus was.

In Matthew 26:1-2, we read . . .

*When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,
2 "You know that after two days the **Passover** is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."*

Notice a few things about these verses... First, Jesus says, "You know." Sometimes we use that phrase haphazardly--- "you know, I think you're right." Or "you know I can't stand Brussel sprouts." But here, it's being used very specifically, on purpose. Jesus is reminding the disciples that what He predicted about His suffering and death—it was about to go down.

Notice also that, in this translation, it says, "*the Son of Man will be handed over.*" In Greek, the present tense is used rather than the future tense. In other words, Jesus isn't telling His disciples that his betrayal and crucifixion are going to happen in the future. He's telling them that it's *about* to happen. In fact, everything is moving forward in that direction *right now*.

Can you imagine this scene? According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had just finished teaching a number of parables—special story-like lessons that taught the crowds about life in the Kingdom of God. And afterwards, He turns to His disciples and says, "*You know in two days, Passover's coming... and you know what that means... I'm going to be handed over to be crucified. So, it's starting now.*" Alright, so you're one of Jesus's disciples—what are you thinking and feeling in this moment?

Jesus knows He's now in the last days of His earthly life—and what He's facing is going to be brutal. Are you walking in the skin of the disciples yet? In the skin of Jesus?

Well, He was surely walking in ours.

In writing this Gospel account, Matthew wants us to know two things:

First, he wants us to know that Jesus chose to go to the Cross. Several times He's told the disciples that He's going to Jerusalem, He's going to be betrayed, and He's going to be crucified. For Jesus, this is His mission. It's why He was born. He was born to die at the right time, for the right purpose. Jesus is fully aware of what this means for Him.

Second, Matthew wants us to know that the religious leaders of the day had a hand in causing Jesus's death. Look at what Matthew writes in verses 3-5:

³ Then the **chief priests** and the **elders of the people** gathered in the palace of the **high priest**, who was called Caiaphas, ⁴ and they **conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him**. ⁵ But they said, "**Not during the festival**, or there may be a riot among the people."

It's important to realize that Matthew was writing primarily to Jewish readers. He was telling them the stories about who Jesus was, what He taught, and why – in specific ways – *He, Jesus*, was the long-awaited Messiah. Matthew is not condemning *all* Jewish people here. He's not even implicating all Jewish people in the death of Jesus. Rather, Matthew is pointing out that those who were in charge of the spiritual life of the Jewish people had forgotten who they were called to be. They had become "*blind guides*" and "*hypocrites*," as Jesus says in **Matthew 23:23-24**. In other words, those who searched the Scriptures every day looking for signs of the coming Messiah actually missed His arrival because they were threatened by everything that Jesus represented.

Verse 4 says, "*they **conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him***." That means that their plot to kill Jesus was premeditated. That paints a pretty bad picture of those religious leaders, right?

Well, I think the chief priests and the elders – and the high priest – were scared. They were scared—and their anxiety made them do stupid things, ignorant things, evil things. What were they scared of? I believe they were scared of the anointing of God on Jesus. I believe deep down they were afraid that all that they had been believing, all that they had been practicing in their religion, all that they had accrued in their influence... all of it had actually pulled them off course, pulled them away from the heart of God, away from God's original intent—and that created a chasm in their relationship with God. And Jesus – Jesus made them face into that chasm, into their denial, and into their multi-generational failure at carrying out their divine mission. Israel had been set apart to be a witness to the world. But they had forgotten who they were called to be.

The religious leaders had become a closed power group that sought to control the people, their circumstances, and their positions. Now, I don't doubt that *they* believed that they were righteous in their duties. Many of them grew up believing in the very things that actually *prevented* them from encountering the heart of God. But Jesus comes along and reminds them—and reminds the people—that God has called them to a different Way. "*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness*," Jesus had taught (**Matt. 6:33**). Jesus's proclamations about the kingdom of God were subversive – and they threatened the religious structures that had been built up over many years. Jesus refocused the crowds on an entirely different way of approaching God—giving voice to their oppression, their hopes, their needs, their worries—and portraying God as One who hears, cares, sees, knows, and has responded incarnationally. And in love, Jesus called them all to repent, to turn from their life of sin and brokenness, to turn from their oppressive hopelessness, and to turn to God. And Jesus's invitation was extended to everyone -- including even those religious leaders.

But it's very hard to repent when you don't see your sin, your brokenness, or your need for grace.

You see, incarnational leaders must learn to love the people before they can lead them, walk with them before they can preach to them, cry with them before they can confront them, and trust them before they can ask them to follow their leadership toward a new beginning. Incarnational leaders need to do life with the people in the trenches—their trenches—confident in the One who has called them (and us) to new life. Jesus climbed into humanity's skin and walked around in it... and that exposed to all the fact that the religious leaders did not.

In response to Jesus's teachings, the religious leaders were forced to face the truth – the kind of truth that exposes in order to heal. And what they saw in themselves they didn't like. So, they did what human beings have done since the days of Genesis 3 – they blamed someone else. They blamed Jesus.

And here's the deal – in God's infinite love for humanity, even –and perhaps especially—those who clearly don't deserve it, Jesus actually took on that blame. He took it onto Himself. His choice to go to His death on the Cross proved to all humanity that God was not defined by the anxieties of His people... but that He was willing to take it -- on our behalf. He did it instead of us.

He paid it forward.

Well after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, one of Jesus's closest friends, the apostle Peter, would capture this beautiful character trait of the God Who Gave His All. First **Peter 5:6-7** says, "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.*"

God has a history of taking our anxieties onto Himself.

Facing into His own death and taking on the anxieties of humanity didn't mean that Jesus Himself wasn't scared. He was fully human—and in His humanity He felt the full range of human emotions. We know, for example, that hours before His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that if it were God's will, that He might not have to face the brutality of the Cross. He prayed so fervently that "*His sweat became like drops of blood,*" according to **Luke 22:44**. He would not have been fully human if He did not have a realistic perspective of what crucifixion meant for Him.

But Jesus also knew who He was and why He was there. He had a divine mission; and that mission trumped His fears.

Matthew knew who Jesus was too. Writing from the perspective of having seen the resurrected Jesus, Matthew was able to capture the heart of that divine mission as he retold the events leading up to Jesus's death. That's what this sermon series is

all about. We're calling it, "Instead of Me" – and we're looking at both what Jesus did on our behalf, and what we're called to do on His.

In light of all that I just described about verses 1-5, let's look briefly at what Matthew writes next – starting in verse 6 – and pausing periodically to comment on what we're reading:

*⁶ Now while Jesus was at Bethany **in the house** of Simon the **leper**...*

So, I have to pause quickly here to point something out: Simon the leper was no longer a leper. Every indication is that he used to be a leper, but presently he is not. Otherwise, he would not have been living at home, he would not have been throwing a dinner party for a bunch of guests, and most likely, none of the guests would have been present. Bible scholars believe that most likely, Simon was one of the people that Jesus healed of leprosy – and the dinner party was Simon's way of saying thanks.

The story continues – in verse 7 –

*⁷ a **woman** came to Jesus with an alabaster jar of very **costly** ointment, and she poured it **on his head** as he sat at the table.*

Can you imagine that happening at one of your dinner parties? This woman comes to Jesus and she takes a very expensive ointment and pours it on His head!

*⁸ But when the **disciples** saw it, they were **angry** and said, "**Why this waste?**" ⁹ For this ointment could have been sold **for a large sum**, and the **money given to the poor.**" ¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "**Why do you trouble the woman?** She has performed a good service for me. ¹¹ For **you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.**" ¹² By pouring this ointment on my body **she has prepared me for burial.** ¹³ Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told **in remembrance of her.**"*

So, the disciples' reaction is interesting. They've just spent three years with Jesus – watching Him do amazing miracles like walking on water, feeding 5,000+ people from a few loaves of bread and a couple fish, curing lepers, healing blind people, casting out demons – oh, and raising dead people... and they still don't get who He is and why He's there and what's about to take place! But this woman – she gets Him. As she looks at Jesus, she sees the God who sees her. She takes what probably cost her a fortune and lavishes it on Jesus.

Whether or not she realized it, she paid it forward – on behalf of the One who empathized with her. For her, this was an act of humble gratitude. For Jesus, it was an anointing for burial.

For us, it was an experience that would be remembered – causing us to remember God's incarnational leader.

Like the disciples who failed to see the Jesus they walked with, the religious leaders failed to see the Messiah they earnestly prayed for over many centuries. Like the religious leaders who seemed to focus only on the so-called religious things, the disciples seemed focused solely on how the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, that's an incredibly good thing. But in this moment, both the disciples and the religious leaders didn't realize *Who* was in their midst and *what* really was taking place.

But this woman did. What must Jesus have done for her to cause her to do this act of outrageous gratitude? Was she one who had been healed? Was she one from whom demons were cast out? Was she one who had experienced outlandish forgiveness?

And, by the way, did anyone else in the room actually see *her*? Or did they only see the intrusion—or the money that could have been saved? But Jesus saw her. Certainly, He knew the needs of the poor – the countless numbers of people who needed resources. But He most especially in this moment saw the one—the one person, this one woman who, in her culture, perhaps was not typically seen or counted or honored. But Jesus saw her. Jesus received from her--her incredibly outlandish gift.

While God sees the many, God also sees the one. How many lives have been changed by having heard this account of this woman and her alabaster jar of ointment?

According to Atticus Finch, empathy requires that we climb into another person's skin and walk around in it. And empathy is required of anyone who would be an incarnational leader. **Hope is not birthed from a distance.**

For the follower of Jesus, every act of kindness, every act that pays it forward, is an opportunity to climb into the skin of another – to walk as Jesus walked, to love as Jesus loved, to forgive those who may not deserve such unmerited grace – and to do so as an ambassador of hope. By her actions, the woman here in the house of Simon the leper tells a story of a life forever changed by a simple truth – a truth that Jesus is facing in that very moment: **In order for there to be a resurrection something – or someone – has to die.**

The good news is that Jesus was that One who was anointed for us. He died for us.

Jesus truly saw this woman when others did not. And now, when we see this woman, we see Jesus. It's what we remember about her story.

Incarnational leaders truly believe in the mission. They are committed wholeheartedly to what God is doing in the world. In fact, there's nothing more important than God's divine mission.

It may not be for a doggie donut, but I challenge you to pay it forward. I'm not asking you to do an "acts of kindness" program for the week. I'm asking all of us

to climb into someone else's skin and walk around in it for a while. You may just discover that your act of empathy in Jesus's name brings hope to that other person's life.

Let's pray our prayer together:

**Lord, what do You need me to see, what do You need me to hear,
what do You need me to know, what do You need me to do?
I am Your servant in Jesus's name. Amen.**

Hey, if you're reading this right now and what you've just read is nudging at your heart... that's the Holy Spirit. God is inviting you to trust Him by taking a step in faith. Maybe that step for you is to pay it forward with someone else. Maybe it's to change the way you approach your life every day – actually looking for opportunities to pay it forward. That's great! I look forward to hearing your stories on how God impacts your life in this way. Maybe for you, it's a decision to be baptized or to participate in a reaffirmation of your baptism vows. If that's you, just reach out to us – email me – david@stpauls.faith or call the church office. Maybe for you, it's a decision to partner with us in becoming a full member of the St. Paul's community, partnering with us in our mission to out-love the world as followers of Jesus. If that's you, then I want to invite you to email Pastor John at johnpm@stpauls.faith to let us know you're desiring membership. He'll share with you the next steps.

Whichever you choose, I invite you to take a step forward in faith. Trust Jesus with your life.