

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
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When Comparisons Fail
Mt 26: 11, Lk 7: 47

Matthew 26:11 “For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

Luke 7: 47 “Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Message

When comparisons fail; the scripture I selected today are a case in point.

What do they have in common? How can we compare seemingly unrelated quotes?

The first thing they have in common is to point out we have to be careful picking a line of text or a quote. Context matters. Without it we can apply it inappropriately.

Second, they come from a story about Jesus at dinner with a man named Simon where an unnamed woman anoints him with costly oil. After that, comparisons fail.

Similar to Mark’s gospel, in Matthew’s gospel the story appears at the end of Jesus’ ministry. It is the story of a woman’s abundant love and generosity bracketed by brutality; between people conspiring to arrest and kill Jesus, and Judas agreeing to betray him.¹ Simon, the dinner host is a leper. The disciples challenge the woman and Jesus chastises them. He says, “...wherever this good news is proclaimed... what she has done will be told in remembrance of her,” and “... you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2012/03/extravagant-holiness-alyce-mckenzie-03-26-2012>

Luke's gospel puts the story early in Jesus' ministry. Traveling and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, Jesus has just said some will not accept his message. Luke's Simon is a Pharisee who criticizes Jesus, but only in his thoughts, "If he were a prophet he would know who this woman is (a sinner) and would not allow her to touch him." Luke's Jesus appears to read Simon's mind or at least his body language. Jesus knows what Simon is thinking. He turns a query about debts into a lesson about love and forgiveness, "to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

Unlike these stories John's gospel reports the name of the woman who anoints Jesus, it is Mary. She and her siblings Martha and Lazarus host Jesus' dinner. It is Judas who chastises her over the waste of money that should be used for the poor- money he really wanted to steal. Here Jesus says Mary bought the oil to keep for his burial. (Which makes no sense since she just poured it on his head!)

The stories often get conflated; the prostitute Mary Magdalene (who is never mentioned in any of the stories) anointed Jesus and clearly Judas is always the bad guy. Since the story appears in all the gospels, likely a dinner and anointing did happen. But it is also true that comparison of the details is bound to fail. Instead, we need to see the important lesson they all have to offer. It is not an either this one is correct or that one is more representative of what really happened comparison. It is a both/and situation.

Here is another one. Church bells rang on January 19 at 2:30pm in memory of the over 400,000 people in the US and 2 million in the world who have lost their lives to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Washington National Cathedral in Washington, DC bell tolled slowly and solemnly 400 times over 41 minutes to remember and mourn. The First Friends church bell rang about 480 times for 8 minutes. Instead of comparing the two and debating which way is the right way to do it, I believe our faster pace expanded the meaning of the tolling of the bells.

The ringing resounded with memory and mourning, but it added a sense of urgency and emergency. It is a call to all of us; a call to action in prayer but also to continuing to take precautions and requiring others to do so. It is a call to compassion and caring; for the families who have lost loved ones, the people currently suffering and who will continue to suffer the consequences of the disease, the essential workers who risk the health of themselves and their families to serve, and the medical caregivers laboring with love to save lives where possible, and to provide comfort when it is not possible. Comparing the ringing of the bells fails. It is both/and.

Rather than comparing the stories about the dinner and the anointing we can see they point out many things together. Both lowly marginalized lepers and elite “Pharisees” invite God’s kingdom to come near for “dinner.” Some are authentically seeking relationship while some do it for show. The unwanted and

unloved of the world who bring themselves, their love and their faith unreservedly, abundantly and generously are always accepted and rewarded, over disciples who are hesitant and those who seek their own gain. Those who compare themselves and believe they are superior to others; with strict rules about who is worthy, who God loves, and who is included, who are waiting for the kingdom of God to arrive someday or after death, are left behind. Those who hear, come to believe they are worthy of and allow themselves to be transformed by God's love, those who show faith in the kingdom of God through action, are saved by that faith.² Those who put material wealth and things to come over loving actions and human relationships in the here and now miss the kingdom Jesus exclaimed was already among us.

All four of the gospels report that the woman was chastised for her loving, abundant generous action. Though she has been remembered throughout history in every place the good news is proclaimed, in three of the gospels she doesn't even get a name. But maybe the gospel writers did that on purpose, and one commentator pointed out this might be the best lesson of all from the stories.

She wrote: "There was a time when the fact that this woman with the oil was unnamed was all I could see about this passage. The apparent unfairness of nameless fame was foremost in my mind. Over time, I have come to view it as an opportunity to see myself in her... she commits an act of kindness in a context of

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/your-faith-has-saved-you>

cruelty and honors Jesus with an extravagant outpouring of herself that fills a room with sweet fragrance. Her action is an oasis of honor in a desert of plotting and brutality. While [others around him failed to celebrate and live abundantly in the time they had with him, looked for an opportunity to betray him and make money off him] she made an opportunity to [abundantly love and] honor him. Despite all the hostile power arrayed against Jesus [and her], she manages to find a way to anoint him with a soothing, fragrant ointment. She doesn't ask for fame, just for you and me to do the same.”³

Of all the people in the story, the unnamed woman with fragrant oil certainly comes out smelling the best. After all what can compare to an act of abundant, generous love and kindness? Or another way of putting it, “We cannot compare justice, love, equality, peace, and joy to a pie- where we fear that if you take a piece of pie there is less for me.”

In every part of our life and Meeting, we are called to see, know, and act on the fact we are always invited to God’s dinner table where the feast is abundant and the pie pan is bottomless.

³ <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2012/03/extravagant-holiness-alyce-mckenzie-03-26-2012?p=2>