

Blessed to Be a Blessing – Matthew 26:6-13

In 1948 the Nazarene church was having trouble raising funds for its missionary work. Inflation was on the rise, jobs were getting scarce, and money was in short supply. A recession had hit North America and it was affecting the church. The general missions council for the Church of the Nazarene met to try and come up with ideas of how to raise funds for the missionaries.

At that meeting held in Kansas City was a pastor from Florida. Rev. Mary Elizabeth Venum sat in that meeting and her heart was moved by the needs of the missionaries. Many works got a good start but soon they diminished because they had no place to meet. This troubled Elizabeth Venum greatly, and she thought and prayed about this on that long drive back to Florida.

On that trip God started to speak to Pastor Venum and reminded her of a story from the Gospel of Matthew. It is the story of a woman who comes to Jesus while he is eating with his disciples and she anoints him with very expensive perfume. It is a story of deep love and gratitude flowing from a woman whose life was changed by Jesus.

The story is found in Matthew 26:6-13. It reads like this:

- Read Text -

The story takes place in a small community called Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. We know Bethany is the home of Jesus' good friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. But this story does not take place in their home. Instead, Jesus is in the home of someone known as Simon the Leper. We can only assume that Simon used to be a leper and was healed by Jesus. A leper would not be allowed to have guests or throw a dinner party. They had to stay away from people. But since Simon is the host, we can assume something has changed his life, and the most obvious answer would be that Jesus healed him, and now he was throwing a dinner to say "Thank you."

Though the homes in those days often had courtyards where people came and went, there would have been a stunned silence when this woman – not a servant girl or the hostess – walked into the room and approached Jesus. Some think she was Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, coming to thank Jesus after the raising of her brother from the dead. Some think it was Mary Magdalene, the woman Jesus cast seven demons out of. Matthew simply does not tell us...

This unnamed woman makes her way to Jesus, holding in her hands a jar made out of Alabaster. She carefully breaks the seal at the top and starts to pour the contents on the head of Jesus. Suddenly the air is filled with a beautiful perfume smell. There was no doubt that this was a very expensive perfume. In Mark's account of the anointing of Jesus the perfume is said to be worth a year's wages. It was a very costly gift.

It was a gift of love.

Even without Matthew telling us how Jesus had changed this woman's life, we know she is very grateful, and she loves Jesus more than anything else in this world. How do we know? We

simply look at her gift. This simple snapshot in the life of Jesus shows us a woman who would give her very best as a gift to Jesus.

She has been blessed by Jesus, and in return she wants to be a blessing to him. The perfume would smell amazing in a land where most gatherings smelled of body odor and dirty feet. The only relief was often perfume to cover up the smells.

There was also something soothing and comforting about the perfume running through the hair and down the head. Almost like a gentle message of the scalp. We can almost see Jesus close his eyes for a moment, and savour the relaxing, calming feeling of the oil running down his head. Maybe we would even hear a small sigh...

Looking at what is happening around Jesus at this time we can see how precious even a moment of peace would be. Matthew records just before this event that the religious leaders are plotting to kill Jesus. Immediately following this event, Matthew records how Judas arranges to betray Jesus to those very same religious leaders. In the midst of a storm of betrayal comes this beautiful gesture of love.

It was a precious moment - until the disciples spoiled it by complaining that this gift of love was a terrible waste. They thought the money would have been put to better use in their money bag. Because we have already read to the end of the story, we know that Judas, the group's treasurer, had a habit of dipping into the group's funds for his own purposes. It is suggested this may be his motive once again...

Knowing the heart of Jesus to care for those in greatest need the disciples suggest that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. They were sure Jesus would agree – but they were very wrong. Jesus reminds them that the poor would always be there to minister to, but he would not be. He knew that before that week ended he would be crucified and buried. Jesus seems to know a great deal about what would happen that weekend, about his betrayal, his arrest, his beatings and crucifixion. Nonetheless, he would still head to Jerusalem, where all this would take place, because it was in Jerusalem that the Passover Lamb was killed. He came to be the “Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world.”

The disciples do not understand that yet.

That night Jesus accepted the gift of the woman. She was blessed, so now she could bless others. She chose to bless Jesus with her gift of love, and he accepted it as a gift to prepare him for his death and burial.

And the story ends with Jesus blessing this woman one more time. Jesus said her story would be told wherever the Gospel was preached. Like it is being told today...

Her gift of love would never be forgotten....

Rev. Vennum thought about that story, and how the woman had given up so much to show her love to Jesus. Some suggested that the perfume might have been her retirement fund, that

treasure she would use when she could not provide for herself anymore. Others simply suggest she had means and this was the way she would have pampered herself – but instead she gave it away out of love for Jesus.

What if Nazarenes learned to give up a want to provide for a need? What if Nazarenes could refrain from buying something they want – but do not need – so they can provide for the needs of the mission field? Could we show our love to Jesus in this way?

The missionary society of the Church of the Nazarene was originally called the Women’s Missionary Society as it was led and attended mainly by women. So Rev. Vennum, using the slogan **“Give up a want to meet a need”** challenged the women to refrain from buying that hat, or dress, or even that perfume, and instead put the money aside for a special love offering for missions. It would be called an Alabaster Offering, reminding us of the woman in Matthew 26 who brought her gift to Jesus in an alabaster jar. A special box was even designed to hold the money saved for this offering, our Alabaster boxes.

I have grown up with that Alabaster box. First there was one in the home, and I watched my parents put their coins in it and take it to the two Alabaster offerings we have every year: one in September, and one in February. When I started to earn my own money as a teenager, I had my own box to put my coins in (usually pennies). When Lise and I married, we kept an Alabaster box in the home so we could put our gifts of love in it in preparation for Alabaster Sunday. Of course these days we use less coins – and no pennies, which used to be the bulk of the Alabaster offering, much to the dismay of those who were privileged to count the offering – so today we write a cheque, use e-transfer or use cash bills.

Two weeks ago, God challenged me in my Alabaster giving. I knew Lise would write a cheque when Alabaster Sunday came, but we still have a box to catch the small coins that we bring home from time to time. I use that box to put the coins I find on the road. I find a lot of coins on the ground. I am not sure if I walk with my head down, or if, as my kind wife says, I have a sharp eye...

But I was feeling pretty good about putting my “found money” into that box, though it really did not seem like much of a gift of love. There really was no sacrifice...

So God shook things up on me two weeks ago. Saturday mornings I go for a short jog, following the same route every Saturday. Two weeks ago I started out and when I got to the place I cross a major intersection, the light turned red. I decided to turn the corner and run down the road a ways and cross over later. As I turned the corner I noticed what looked like money on the ground. Now I often have this strange dream when I go to pick up money on the ground and there is so much I cannot carry it all. This time I was shocked to see a \$20 bill on the ground. As I slowed up to pick up my treasure I saw another \$20 bill... and another, just like in my dream! I now had \$60 in my pocket as I ran my route. I ran a little faster and lighter that day!

And my mind was going faster than my feet. What would I do with \$60? Take Lise out for dinner? Buy something, maybe something for the yard. Save it for a rainy day...

The Spirit reminded me that I put found money into my Alabaster box. Would this be different because there was more? **God blessed me by letting me find the money, now, could I be a blessing to someone else?**

It was clear what I should do. I was ashamed of myself for finding it easier to put nickels, dimes, and loonies into my box than \$20 bills! If I was short of money that would be different, but God knew I had no shortage. I am sure He was testing me. I could almost hear the words he spoke to Peter, "Do you love me more than these?"

My life is blessed with so much, and I am sure the reason is not so I can hoard it to myself, but so that I can be a blessing to others.

Fortunately, over the years Nazarenes around the world have caught the spirit of that woman who came to Jesus so long ago with her Alabaster jar filled with perfume.

Since 1948 this offering has been taken two times a year in almost every world area where the Church of the Nazarene ministers. Our boxes of coins – and maybe the occasional \$60 – add up. Since 1948 over \$112 million dollars have been raised to help churches around the world secure property or build a building so they can be a visible, permanent part of the community.

I apologize to John Roman if I am overlapping any of the material you are presenting tonight at our Missions meeting. I hope everyone will come tonight at 6 pm and hear the difference this offering is making in the life of so many churches.

In Oklahoma City a teacher in the public school prayed for twenty years for the Church of the Nazarene to come to her neighbourhood. There was so much need, violence and dysfunction in that area. Finally, someone came to start a work in that area, and though they rented the cafeteria for a time from the school for their meetings, it soon became clear that would not provide the kind of space they needed to reach the community.

Just up the road from the school was an old abandoned warehouse. Alabaster funds helped secure that building for this new church plant, and teams from across the District and beyond came and turned that old warehouse into a wonderful ministry center. Yes, 20% of the Alabaster funds are reserved for ethnic ministries in USA and Canada.

But it would not have been possible without the support of Alabaster funds.

In Haiti, the church had helped the congregation in Limbe rent a facility for its ministry. Some of your World Evangelism Funds helped with this, for in a country where most people live in poverty, even paying rent was too much for the church.

The downside about renting is that your landlord can change the deal whenever he wants, and that happened with this church time and time again. The landlord tried to evict the church

many times, and even boarded up the building on occasion, causing the District Superintendent to make a trip to the city to negotiate a deal with the owner.

The congregation started to look for their own place, but they could not afford any land, or even find a good location for sale. They looked at buildings they could purchase and renovate, but nothing was suitable.

So the people kept praying and trusting God to do something.

One day a pastor in the city who had an independent ministry and happened to own his own church building and parsonage, decided he would be leaving that area. He put his properties up for sale, great buildings in a good location for ministry. With the help of Alabaster funds these buildings were purchased and the church continues to grow and minister to the people in Limbe.

We have been blessed, so we can be a blessing to others. Alabaster is only one way we can pass the blessings on.

May we, as a congregation never forget how blessed we are. God has put us in a great location in a building that meets our needs and provides us with a resource to do ministry. We are blessed. So are we being a blessing to our community?

Individually we are all blessed by the love and grace of God. God, through Christ Jesus, provided the way for us to have our sins forgiven so we could have an eternal relationship with the living, holy God. We are saved by grace through faith, meaning God has done all that is necessary for our salvation. We simply accept that fact by faith, repenting of our sin and committing to follow Jesus.

As God's Children, which is what we are as we put our faith in Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit living in us to guide us, empower us for service, and to fill us with God's love so we really care about others and not just ourselves. We have learned to love our neighbour with God's help, loving them enough to tell them about salvation in Jesus.

We are blessed, so that we will be a blessing to others.

I am challenged by the Alabaster story. Is my life truly a blessing to others? Is this congregation a blessing to our community?

We are blessed to be a blessing to others. How will we do that?

As you prayerfully consider that question, we have a short video about a church connected to us through Alabaster who started to understand they too were blessed to be a blessing...