



A Colossal Waste of Time and Money

Heather Blair - 09/25/2022

How did your Monday morning go this week? Can you even remember back that far? It seems like so much happens in the world in one week these days that there's a year between Monday morning and Sunday morning.

I do remember my Monday morning. I recently moved in with my mom. Hi Mom! She needs a little extra help, so we're roomies now. Monday morning she had a doctor's appointment we were going to head to, but by chance we woke up a little bit early. So, like more than a billion other people apparently, we turned on the TV—which was full of Queen Elizabeth's funeral. We weren't awake early enough to catch the actual service at Westminster Abbey, I mean, we're not crazy. But, we did watch for a solid hour. A whole hour where the only thing that happened was the procession of her coffin. A whole hour of hundreds of people just walking by hundreds of thousands of other people. Superlative words just don't seem to capture it—grand, extravagant, majestic EXTRA.

At one point I caught myself thinking, "What a colossal...waste of time and MONEY." Because it wasn't just a few more than a billion people who watched her funeral—it was FOUR billion worldwide. For an average of two hours. That is EIGHT BILLION human hours—what could we do for the world with eight billion human hours? And, nobody is going to say how much it cost—but most estimates agree it was probably more than \$10 million. And, if you count in the money lost for Monday being declared a

national holiday in England, then the cost is more than \$1 billion. For one ninety-six year old human's funeral. Just, what?! My brain was being pretty judgy about that at 6:30am on Monday morning.

But, there was also something compelling about it, you know? The royal family didn't spend an hour and a half walking behind the queen for themselves. They did it for the sake of the one million people who lined the streets to see her. People who came because they wanted to, because they wanted to be a part of the experience. To express their reverence and gratitude for this human. I don't have to understand it for it to be real to them. Maybe sometimes extravagant shows of love don't need to have someone crunching their numbers. Not for the people experiencing the love, for sure.

The whole thing reminds me of one of my favorite stories in the Bible. It's a story that comes from the waning days of Jesus' life on earth. From the time when he is about to die. The tone around him has grown ominous. People are tired and tense. They don't all know it, but the end is near. Jesus and many of his followers have gathered together for dinner, and they may be trying to fake a good time—but nobody's really having one.

Let's look at it in Mark Chapter 14:3-9:

³ While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

⁴ Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? ⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

⁶“Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

So, here we find a group of people who witness an extravagance so great that it borders on absurd. A year’s wages worth of perfume poured out all at once. Easy to think: a colossal waste of time and money. I wonder how the disciples would have described their reactions. Appalled, offended, disgusted, outraged.

Jesus’ disciples know he has a heart for people at the margins—like the poor. And, they know he has no affection for money or possessions. They’ve heard him rebuke folks for doing frivolous things with money—like hoarding it or flaunting it. So, they jump on her.

I get it, I do. I did the math about human hours spent watching a funeral. But here’s where the disciples and I get it wrong: in our rush to negative judgment, when there is actually something momentous happening.

The sound of breaking alabaster is still in the air and their critiques have already begun. And while they may have learned a thing or two about Jesus’ views on wealth, it seems like the lesson they’ve been presented with the most is this: Jesus never quite does what you expect him to do.

He always seems to see something that others don’t. The people you expect to be villains he applauds, and the apparent heroes he shrugs off. Over and over and over. He doesn’t measure things by the long-held standards.

So, you'd think that his followers would have developed some awareness of this...and that interludes like this (after 3 years of training) might go something like, "Hey, what's that lady up to? She's making me uncomfortable for some reason. I'm going to say some...uh, no. Hang on. Let me wait to see how Jesus responds, and then I'll go."

Instead they jump in—and try to say the stuff they think Jesus would say before he can say it. They rush to judgment, and weirdly, their judgments are all off. They aren't measuring the moment the way Jesus does.

So Jesus rebukes them, "Stop picking this apart," Jesus seems to say. Stop rushing in with your critiques and attempts to control what's going on. Stop trying to do things "right" by memorization.

Something real and genuine is happening here. Just quiet down and try to take it in. This woman and I are having a holy encounter.

This is an extravagant outpouring of generosity. An absurd sacrifice made for no other reason than love. A love so strong that it manifests—it becomes something tangible in time and space. Please stop analyzing it, Jesus might say, and sit in awe of it for just a few minutes. Soak in the sights and the smells. This woman and I are having a holy encounter, and you could be part of it.

And PS, Jesus could continue: Isn't that why you're here? To experience me? Why are you settling for your religious reflexes when we could all experience something beautiful together?

I'm taking some creative license here, but this is the heart of Jesus' rebuke. The bit about the poor isn't really any kind of instruction about the poor. It's a reference to the Law, and the traditions surrounding the Law. For the Jewish people, by law, Passover is a time to be generous to the poor. The disciples aren't making a call for generosity out of some internal sense of

actual compassion toward people experiencing poverty. They're regurgitating a guideline that's been ingrained in them by the Law. The poor aren't necessarily human beings that the disciples care about, they're just a means to obeying the Law.

And Jesus isn't having it.

The Law, Jesus might begin ranting again, was just supposed to be a means to experience God. And guess what?! HERE I AM, and even after three years you guys are still missing it! You're still not truly experiencing me.

Can I tell you a secret?

Very few of us are experiencing God the way we could. To the degree we wish we would.

Is that a secret? Why is that a secret? Look, I believe in God. And I have experienced God. But I have also gone long periods where I haven't experienced God in the way I'd like to. And as a pastor I had plenty of people tell me about their longing for the presence of God, but their lack of feeling it. But, they always told it like a shameful secret. I don't think that's the way God wants it. We don't fix anything by pretending.

It's a dirty little secret for some reason that we don't experience God the way we wish we would. But what if we just admit it, and ask for some help? This story offers us some help if we'll pay attention.

Here are a few things I see that can help us cultivate our awareness of encounters with God:

1. Be willing to be delighted. We live in a culture that is lightning-fast in its criticism. If we're not careful, we can buy into the illusion that it's more respectable to be able to tear something apart than to be amazed that it was created. The disciples make this mistake. I'm not saying discernment is

never appropriate, but I am saying it ought to take a back seat to our willingness to be delighted—our openness to what is magnificent around us.

I learned a word this week from Father Gregory Boyle. A man who works with reformed and reforming gang members in LA. The word is “acatamiento” which is Spanish for affectionate awe. Affectionate awe. Father Boyle says the way he stays fresh and present even after years of working with a hardened population of people is by taking a stance of affectionate awe with every person he meets. This allows him to actually have an authentic encounter with people instead of settling for a kneejerk judgment about them.

A stance of affectionate awe in the world. A willingness to be delighted.

How can God hope to catch our attention if we’re only ever looking down our noses at everything around us?

Let’s be willing to be delighted.

Another tip we get from this story is:

2. Be willing to be vulnerable with God. Let your guard down. We might have to sacrifice something of our pride, of what is precious to us. Can you imagine being in the shoes of our unnamed woman? She’s had some kind of profound experience with Jesus. She might not understand fully who he is, but she knows he’s the most incredible person she’ll ever come across. She knows that he deserves to be honored in extravagant fashion.

How do you say thank you to someone who has saved you? To someone you might sorta kinda suspect might maybe be more than just a human. Does Hallmark make a card?

She comes up with this crazy idea. It's not completely unheard of in their culture, but it's still pretty out there. Especially as a surprise gift. What if he doesn't like it? What if it doesn't bring him joy? What if he mis-understands what she means?

For me, the agony of being in her shoes wouldn't just be the rebuke of the disciples—it would be the waiting and waiting and waiting on them to stop their tirades so I could hear what Jesus thought of what I'd done.

One of the things that makes experiencing God so difficult is the waiting and waiting and waiting. Nothing feels emptier than the silence when we're trying to hear God. Nothing feels lonelier than trying to apprehend that He is here in this room even when we can't see Him or feel Him. It makes us vulnerable to wait on God's responses to our responses. We like to fill that emptiness with something. Activity. Busy-ness. But that filler stuff is the very stuff that can distract us when he does respond. We are so often our own obstacles. God's time doesn't work like our time. We have to be willing to endure the waiting and keep ourselves open, even when it hurts.

Let's be willing to be vulnerable with God.

3. And finally, be willing to share your experiences with other people. Even the attempts that don't go so well. We don't work to connect with God just for our own personal benefit. We do it for His benefit, and very often he chooses to pass that benefit on to other people. Mark tells us the story that Jesus wants the whole world to remember. Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." It's the story of her holy encounter, but it's also the story of disciples' mistakes—and Mark is one of those disciples! He's willing to tattle on himself to tell her story, and maybe to help us avoid his mistakes.

We mainliners can get super uncomfortable with the idea of being too showy. Of having others see what we're doing. But there's evidence aplenty in scripture that our faith lives are meant to be public. Not so that people will be impressed with us, but so they may encounter God with us...and to experience what it's like to be a human being trying to encounter the endlessly knowable God of all things.

If you've ever been in a small group or Bible study led by Pastor Lori, you've probably answered the question, "Where have you seen God this week?" It's a good question. It invites us to slow down and pay attention. Even if only in retrospect. You remember that word, "acatamiento"? Affectionate awe? The stance Father Boyle invites us to take to be more prepared to see things as God sees them? "Acatamiento" comes from the Spanish word "acatar" which means to pay attention to. We get to affectionate awe by paying attention.

"Where have you seen God this week?" Pastor Lori has asked it of me many times now. And the truth is, sometimes I haven't had an answer. I couldn't think of a time where I had seen or felt God in that week. It's easy to want to scramble and make something up, but I try to fight off that impulse to have my struggles with experiencing God be my dirty little secret. Instead, I just try to tell the truth. Then I lean into the stories that other people around me share. Of ways grandiose and everyday where they have seen God. And you know what happens almost every time? Those conversations become a way of encountering God together.

It doesn't have to be a dirty little secret that we don't experience God to the degree and amount that we wish we would. We don't have to pretend. We don't have to cover up what we're missing with rushes to judgment and theological critiques of others. We can take a breath, slow down, pay attention. We can be willing to be delighted, we can be vulnerable with God, and we can take the risk of sharing our encounters together.

We live in a world that is suspicious and cynical and quick to critique. But we also live in a world full of people who are hungry for delight and awe. Just ask any of the one million people who lined up for hours to see a coffin. But for them it was the coffin of their queen. A person they hold with affectionate awe. There was clearly something more going on in London on Monday than just a funeral. It was about their identity as a people. Their history. Their heroes. It seemed like it wasn't for me, so my brain went to crunching numbers and being judgy—like the disciples with the woman in our story. But, for all of us, moments grandiose or quiet are all full of potential for affectionate awe—a stance that opens us up for holy encounters with God.

Jesus won't allow arguments to be made that the woman at Bethany committed a colossal waste of time and money. He makes a point to tell us that this story will be told ANY TIME the gospel is preached around the world. And it has been, for two thousand years, all across the globe.

Why does Jesus want THIS story to accompany the gospel? The gospel. The truth about God and God's immeasurable love for us. Because the gospel isn't just some information to be memorized. It's not something to just have all the correct answers about. It's an invitation to experience God—to have holy encounters in our everyday moments. To see God at work in and around us, and to live in the fully present way we're meant to.

"Where have you seen God this week?" Maybe you could talk about it in the car on your way home, or around your lunch table or right here in a pew before you go. It's a good question, even if your answer is, "I don't know." The story of the woman and her perfume also includes the disciples and their mistakes, Jesus brings them back in and gives them a second chance at the holy encounter. We get plenty of second chances too. No dirty secrets around here. There's no need for them. Instead, let's trade our rushes to judgment for affectionate awe and just see what happens.