

You may recall from last week's reading that the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees were all scheming against Jesus. Our passage this evening begins with the Chief Priests and the scribes continuing to be after him. They really wanted to be rid of him, but with the Passover approaching they were afraid of a riot among the people. Remember that it is only a few days after Jesus' triumphant entry to Jerusalem with the population strewing the path in front of him with palm branches. If the people were to riot to support Jesus, the priests would be irretrievably weakened among the Jews and possibly deprived of their privilege by the Romans. Do not forget that this is a period where Judea was under direct Roman rule. The Temple authorities were tolerated by Rome as long as they created no problems. Indeed, fewer than 40 years later, after four years of Jewish rebellion, the Emperor Titus ordered the city and the second Temple completely destroyed and the murder of the priests and other Temple officials. The only remnant of that Temple is its base and some foundation stones that for contemporary Jews is the Wailing Wall – a place of lament and of expressions of hope for a different future. That is the context for our passage.

One of the literary devices Mark uses in his Gospel is compare and contrast. An early example is in chapter 5. Where Jesus is approached by Jarius a leader of the synagogue, one of the most high status people in the area. He begs Jesus to attend his seriously ill daughter. On the way there the crowd is pressing around Jesus, but he feels power go out of him. He stops and says, *Who touched me?* A poor woman with hitherto incurable haemorrhages confesses that she touched the hem of his cloak. Jesus replies, *Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.* Meanwhile word arrives that Jarius' daughter has died. Jesus says to him, *do not fear, but believe.* He takes the dead girl's hand and says, *Little girl get up,* and she does. Another literary device to enhance compare and contrast is often in Mark's writing, what is known to Biblical scholars as the Markan sandwich. In this case, the story of the haemorrhaging woman is sandwiched between Jarius' urgent summons to Jesus and his arriving at the Jarius' house. Why is he stopping on the way when the little girl is dying? The fact that the woman is cured and the little girl raised from the dead emphasizes that Jesus is for everyone regardless of their status – a bleeding woman in the dust and a little girl of great privilege – both are healed and not even in the order one might expect. Remember Jesus told Jarius, *do not fear but believe* which is closely aligned with *your faith has made you well.*

Compare and contrast through the use of a "sandwich" is used very powerfully in our reading. The reading begins with the venial scheming of the priests and the scribes to kill Jesus. It ends with Judas agreeing to betray Jesus to those priests and scribes for money. The ending very naturally follows the beginning, But in between the story of the venial priests and the craven Judas, comes the story of the woman selflessly, without regard to cost, anointing Jesus with a very expensive ointment. In Mark's writing, the meat in the sandwich provides staggering contrast to the stories in which it is embedded and staggering insight – none more so than in this passage.



There are other examples in Mark of the sandwich and compare and contrast: there is the story of the fig tree that is not producing fruit; the story of the cleansing of the temple is inserted; followed by an additional account of the fig tree now withered and dead. The fig tree is representation of the Temple – barren. As we know the withered and dead will come in around 40 years. Perhaps most powerfully In Mark 8, 9, and 10 in the midst of teachings and miracles, Jesus directly predicts his death three times. Even in the story of the woman and the ointment, there is another sandwich of prediction: *...but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.*

So as per usual, I conclude with, what does it mean for us? Well to start we might each ask ourselves, who am I? Am I one of the priests or scribes who is concerned that my position or status might be in danger? Am I Judas, eager to grow my fortune? Or am I the woman, eager to serve Jesus in any and every way I can? Sadly I can say that for me, the answer to all three questions is yes. Yes, I have been overly concerned with my status. Yes I have cared deeply and compulsively for more money. And yes, there have been times, I have been able to selflessly serve my Lord. I wish I could say that the number of those times even equalled the times for the other two, but I sadly doubt it would be true.

One of my greatest joys at being old is that I care for status and money much less than once I did, but that's probably only because I have enough and I know I can't take it with me and because beyond a certain point, neither really matters. That is the human condition. We are fortunate enough to learn, but often, rather later than would have been ideal.

We do have one advantage as church people of faith. While we have been trying to be faithful, status, social acceptance, and wealth have melted away from our identity as church people. If the rest of society ever gives us a thought, we are odd at best and insane at worst. I find when I move in secular organizations, there is an awkward silence when it comes up that I go to church. The awkwardness is even more noticeable when they hear that I preach every Wednesday and on an occasional Sunday. But then someone quickly changes the subject and the awkwardness dissipates. They are not even curious. We simply don't matter. And what a gift that is! We are liberated to simply get on about the work of followers of Jesus. Will we fall off the wagon attracted to money or status, of course, but our Lord is always there to help us back on. Lastly I am beyond grateful to have the sense of God with me as I navigate this ever more disturbing world. I cannot imagine how I could stay sane without the lens of Biblical insight to make it clear to me than there have been other bad times and God was with his people. I suggest we adopt a practice of the Markan sandwich. While we are deploring the miseries being unleashed in this world, from time to time, we should insert a piece of good news. It is still there, but it is so easily missed when the miseries seem insurmountable. If the people of Gaza or Ukraine can have a sense of God with them. Who are we to despair? Do not fear, but believe. Amen