

Sunday, April 1, 2012: Isaiah 50:4–9a; Philippians 2:5–11; Mark 14:1–15:47

by [F. Dean Lueking](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue

The gospel reading this week tells the poignant story of the nameless woman's anointing of Jesus at the house of Simon the Leper.

Its poignancy is all the more striking because it is the last deed of kindness done to Jesus before his death. Picture him reclining on low couches with the disciples. She enters, breaks a flask of costly perfume and pours it upon his head—not a few drops as custom would call for but all of it, the equivalent of a year's income. Mark notes that some were angered by what they saw as waste. Matthew identifies them more specifically as "the disciples" (26:8), and we can imagine their eyes narrowing as they condemned the act as shocking. Not so Jesus. He not only accepted the act but lifted it to a place of unprecedented honor as one that "will be remembered wherever the good news is preached in the world." We remember it today.

Jesus praised the woman for the spontaneous extravagance of her bold gesture. He says, in the NRSV translation, "She has performed a good service." The Greek here is not *agathos*, implying utility and moral correctness, but *kalon*, implying something not only good but lovely, gracefully winsome in its uniqueness. "She has done a lovely thing" reads better. She knew in her heart of hearts that if she did not honor Jesus at that moment, it would be too late. Blessed is the believer, the congregation, the church that can adorn the gospel with "lovely things." Years ago I gained that insight from William Barclay.

The context of the Philippian reading reveals this truth about every Christian congregation, whether in first-century Philippi or today: there are some who are the church and some who use the church. Paul addresses the sins of pettiness, selfish ambition and conceit. He shows a pastoral heart for the congregation, however, with his commendation of its members' love, generosity and striving for one-mindedness. What does this saint-and-sinner mix of believers need? Nothing less than the mightiest of God's mighty deeds, expressed in just two sentences that are fairly bursting with glorious profundity as witness to who Jesus Christ is and what he has done. The mystery of God's *kenosis*, the humility of Christ's servanthood, the scandal of his cross, the glory of his exaltation, the harrowing of hell, the final

doxology on every tongue—it's all there in 2:5–11. How many theological writings and councils have pondered it! And how many controversies have arisen from attempting to grasp it—all this from a pastoral appeal to a congregation caught up in squabbles.

This monumental summary of the human Jesus as the exalted Lord was not a lecture or a textbook but a hymn sung by first-century Christians. The truth of the living God is singable truth—and if not singable, then suspect.

I learned to appreciate this easily overlooked fact when as a seminarian I lived with a non-Christian Japanese family. After coming with me to visit the little Yokohama mission congregation I was serving, they exclaimed: "You Christians *sing* your faith!" I've not forgotten that and recommend their amazement for all that it means.

Think of what goes on as people sing the faith. We adore the living God. We encourage and teach each other. We sing truth to ourselves in a healthy way. Yes, hymns can be sung mindlessly. We ought not do that, as for example when singing, "Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold," and then withholding plenty. Amid all the current back and forth about traditional versus contemporary worship styles, isn't attentiveness to what we're confessing while singing the great thing? Where else does that go on week after week, year after year?

Hymns offer life-changing moments. One morning a man told me that he sang a hymn he'd known from childhood but felt its truth as never before. "God never will forsake in need / The soul that trusts in him indeed" was the hymn passage. For years following the birth of their son his wife had suffered a postpartum depression that had descended into full-blown oblivion: she knew no one, rejected everyone. His care for her was unfailing. In that worship service, while singing that hymn, he was given the freedom of grace finally to care for himself and the fine woman he had married.

In my late teens, unsure of what path I should take into my future, I attended a Sunday evening service in a country church. I was exhausted after a Sunday of baling hay and altogether unprepared for what was coming. Then I sang, "Here am I, send me, send me," and the Lord took me up on it. Years later I'm grateful that the Christ of Philippians is still calling and still sending.