



Today's message is the third message I worked on this week. The first two just didn't seem to mesh with what I was sensing from many people, including myself. In recent days I have heard many people express how they feel overwhelmed with stress, anxiety, and exhaustion. In the words of several, they had *hit a wall*, and the reality of hitting a wall is that the wall doesn't give.

It is obvious that we live lives filled with a great deal of responsibility, stress, and exhaustion. We struggle mightily at times to keep up with all we need to do; to be all the places we need to be; and to fulfill our duties, obligations, and responsibilities. If you have not been at that point recently, you will be at some time in the future.

Am I speaking to anyone this morning? I believe I am.

As we continue our Easter series of messages – *The Road to Jerusalem* – this week we come to the topic *Reclining At the Table*. The Scripture passage we will read in a few moments is one that took place shortly after the Triumphal Entry. Its setting is in the midst of an incredibly stressful time for Jesus. Although many of his followers expressed great excitement about the welcome Jesus received in Jerusalem at the Triumphal Entry, Jesus knew what was ahead – his arrest, trial, scourging, and crucifixion

After arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus would depart the city in the evenings and stay in the village of Bethany, which was about a mile and a half to the east, situated on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. It was in Bethany that Mary and Martha lived, and where Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44). It was after the miraculous raising of Lazarus that the religious leaders made the decision to kill Jesus – *so from that day on they plotted to take his life* (John 11:53).

After his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus would go out to Bethany each evening for a couple of reasons. He went to Bethany because it was a safe haven for him. Jesus knew, obviously, of the plot to kill him, and to take advantage of his remaining few days with his disciples meant it was better for him to leave the city at night for a more secure location, where he could be with his closest followers without fear of harm, allowing him to offer his final teachings. Second, it also afforded him the opportunity to relax, which was especially important in light of what was about to take place.

Follow along with me, please, as I read our Scripture text for the morning – Mark 14:1-9

1 Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him.

2 "But not during the festival," they said, "or the people may riot."

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.

7 The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.

8 She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.

9 Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

I really like the image of verse 3 – *while he was in Bethany, reclining at the table*. In the day of Jesus, people did not sit at a table for their meals as we do, but would lean against pillows that were placed around a very low table that held the food and utensils. The word *reclining* provides an image of a relaxing time spent together by family and friends and, in light of what was about to happen, must have provided an atmosphere of comfort and encouragement to Jesus. As we live with so much stress and anxiety, we would do well to enjoy some *reclining at the table*. So, with that image in mind, here is what I want us to hear today –

1. Remember that you are loved.

Bethany was a good place for Jesus. When in Bethany, Jesus was surrounded by people who loved him, such as Mary and Martha and Lazarus. His disciples were also there with him, and presumably others who loved him and cared about him. Sometimes, admittedly, that love from others was a bit tenuous. Martha, you'll remember, confronted Jesus as he approached Bethany to tell him that Lazarus had died. She told him *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died* (**17** *On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.* **18** *Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,* **19** *and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.* **20** *When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.* **21** *"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* **22** *But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."* John 11:17-22). Jesus already had a plan to resurrect Lazarus, but it must have stung to hear those words from Martha. Peter, as we all know, denied Jesus. Not once, but three times. And, Luke tells us, Jesus heard each of those denials (*The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times."* Luke 22:61).

But they loved Jesus, in spite of the fact that their love was sometimes less than perfect. And lest we be too hard on their somewhat tenuous love, we can all be, at times, tenuous with our love. Sometimes, we *say* things that hurt other people. Sometimes we *do* things that hurt other people. Sometimes, we *fail to say* or *fail to do* things, and that hurts people. It's not that we mean to hurt others; it's just that our love is sometimes tenuous and less than perfect. Other people are not always what we would like them to be, but neither are we.

But, in spite of the fact that the love of his followers was less than perfect, Jesus was in the midst of people who loved him, and that meant a great deal to him, I'm sure, especially in the midst of the most trying time of his life. Jesus says in verse 7, *you will not always have me*. That was a sobering warning to his followers. *Don't forget this moment, don't forget that this moment will not always be available, I won't always be here with you*, he is saying. I don't mean to be depressing, but that is a reality we must keep in mind with those we love. Remember you are loved, but remember also that the people God has

chosen to place in our lives are not always going to be with us. Where would we be without those who love us? How would we face the trials and difficulties of life without those who love us? How would we enjoy the blessings of life as deeply if not for those who love us? It would be difficult, if not impossible, but we must remember that every moment they are on our lives is a great gift, so we should,

2. *Do what you can while you can.*

The woman in this story is forever known as one who took this very expensive jar of perfume and broke it open, and then took the contents and poured them onto the head of Jesus. In response, Jesus said *truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her* (verse 9). Some of those present criticized her very harshly for her actions, saying the perfume could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. It was worth a year's income for most people, but if they were really interested in selling it and giving the money to the poor, they would have done it already. No, they simply wanted to criticize her.

The response of Jesus is beautiful – *she did what she could* (verse 8). *She did what she could*. Because we don't have all the time in the world, we must do what we can, while we can. Do what you can while you can. You don't have forever. Sorry for that reminder, but it is the truth. I would like, at times, nothing more than to sink into my own life, doing only what I want to do and withdraw from the hectic, difficult, stressful, world of all that happens around us. We all get to that point, I think, but there is so much important work to do.

I am so often impressed at what you do. I know you have a finite amount of time and that you are pulled in many directions and must balance the stress of trying to balance all the responsibilities and opportunities that come your way. And with so much to do, there you are, at the Touched Twice Clinic, at the Diersen House, teaching Sunday School, leading VBS, working at the Christian Care Community, feeding people at the Serenity Center and God's Kitchen, and serving in so many other ways. Because I am a vocational minister, my time is filled with being in those places as well, but that is what I do; I don't have to fit in those responsibilities and opportunities in a life filled with work responsibilities.

3. *In the midst of so much to do, in the midst of so much stress, in the midst of so much that pulls at us, take time and recline at the table.*

It is really remarkable that Jesus could be so calm when so much chaos swirled about him. There he was, just days from betrayal, from his arrest, from his crucifixion, and he was reclining at the table like all was well. Even though he was among those who loved him, there was conflict over the beautiful, grace-filled action of this woman to anoint him, and there was betrayal in the air. But you know what Jesus didn't do? He didn't freak out! It's hard to remain calm in the midst of stress, but look at Jesus, reclining at the table. I can guarantee you that I would be freaking out! But not Jesus. One of the reasons why Jesus could be so calm was that he took the time to recline at the table. We must do what we can, while we can, but we must not forget that it is also necessary to take the time to recline at the table, where we can recharge our batteries and refresh and renew our spirits.

There are days I feel so discouraged. There are days I want to quit. But I refuse to give in to discouragement, and I will not despair, and I won't because of reclining at the table, allowing God to bring peace, comfort, and strength. When you come to worship, I hope you can put aside your worries and stresses and that the Spirit will release you from them. I know when we leave here, that if your electric bill needs to be paid, it will still need to be paid. I know that when we leave here, if you have a tattered relationship that needs mending, it will still be in need of mending when you leave. I know that when we leave here, if you look at your life you and see what seems to be an insurmountable obstacle, that obstacle won't just up and go away. But I hope and pray that coming to worship, *reclining at the table*, will give you a renewed sense of strength and determination. I hope and pray that you will leave with a greater conviction that God is with you now and will be with you always.

I would like for you to close your eyes so I can pray for you. I want to pray that, as you recline at the table, God will bring renewal to you.