

“Getting It”

Rev. Alida Ward - March 17, 2013

Mark 14:3-9

This past week, for whatever reason, I have found myself in a couple different conversations with church friends where the topic has turned to the subject of childhood nicknames. I now know that one of you grew up being called Mosquito, and another Meatball, and neither of you were that thrilled about it. I actually was always somewhat envious of kids who had nicknames; it seemed like some sort of childhood rite of passage that I was missing out on. I did share with these friends, however, the fact that in my family, I did have a nickname, or at least, a name my dad called me. It was a nickname cleverly disguised as a term of endearment, which in fact it really wasn't. My dad used to call me 'Wee May', which sounded vaguely like a old Scottish phrase, wee little may blossom, or something. But in fact Wee May was not Scots but French. Wee May in French means **Yes, But**. And I was given this *lovely but not really* nickname because I was the Queen of Balktalk .

“Aren't you supposed to be practicing piano?” “Yes, but the Hardy Boys is on and I can't miss it.” *“I thought I asked you to help with the laundry.”* “Yes, but I have to practice piano now.” I was also the self-appointed Empress of Correction; I was rigidly dogmatic about rules, or at least the rules as I perceived them: *“Your brother wants to go to Arby's for dinner.”* “Yes, but I want to go to Pizza Hut and I'm older and the older person picks.” *“The grass really needs cutting.”* “Yes, but it's not my turn, so I don't have to.” My dogmatism was such that my parents used to tell the story of the time I was first taken to an art museum. I pointed at some masterpiece and said, or so I'm told, “This is a really good picture because he stayed inside the lines.” Staying inside the lines – that was me. You can imagine how many friends Wee May had in high school.

This scripture story that [Niles/Katie} just read to you, it's a pretty amazing story. It's a story about Jesus coming up against some Wee Mays in his own camp, some stay-inside-the-lines dogmatists. And it's a story about one remarkably loving and insightful woman.

Here's what happens: It's Tuesday of Holy Week, it's three days before Good Friday, Jesus is only three days away from his death, a death that he knew, surely knew, was soon to come. He knew how frustrated the authorities were

with him, he knew how enraged the religious leaders were with his undermining message of Love over rules. He knew how things were going and how they were going was south, fast. And on this particular night he's spending the evening with friends, he's at dinner in the home of his buddy Simon, with a bunch of his followers, some of his disciples. And they're all busy drinking the wine and yapping it up, talking away, 'cause they don't really get how bad things are about to be. And Jesus, Jesus maybe sits alone with his thoughts, and his own fears, his own *loneliness*, really. And then this happens: in walks a woman whose name we will *never know*, and she's carrying a jar -- a jar of, the bible says, **very** costly oil, nard-- think a gallon of Chanel Number 5, which would run you, in case you're wondering, about \$16 grand. That's what she's got. And she goes over to Jesus, and gently, tenderly, pours it on him, anoints him with it.

And someone at the dinner says, "Oh my gosh, that is such a nice thing that woman just did," but the others, they say, "Yes, but, oh my God, do you *realize* how much that cost?" "Yes, but, that is seriously the most wasteful thing I've ever seen." "*Nice, yes -- but she could have sold that jar for THOUSANDS and we could have provided free meals for the poor in Jerusalem for a year.*" And of course, they're right. They're right. She could have sold the jar for thousands. But this is what Jesus says to them, those dogmatists, those Wee May types. "Leave her alone," he says. She has done a good thing. She has done a good thing for me." And then, the kicker: he says -- *wherever the good news is told*, he says, *what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.*

No one else in the gospels is praised like that. None of Jesus' disciples is celebrated like *that* -- on the contrary, Jesus was constantly tearing his hair out over their inability to grasp anything. It is this woman, this woman *alone*, of whom Jesus says, in essence: **she gets it.**

What she has done here is what the good news is all about: whenever you tell my story, whenever you proclaim the gospel, tell this story in her memory.

So what did she do? What did she **get** that the rest of them weren't getting? The disciples, after all, were right. But what the woman did was more right. Because what this woman did -- *whose name we will never know* -- what she did was done in absolute love. She alone **got** the fact that in this room full of people talking and laughing and eating together, there was one person there who needed care, and that was the care giver himself. The disciples had the principles right, they had the rules figured out, they'd remembered the lectures and memorized the parables, but they were wrong. What Jesus

himself most needed in that moment was not dogmatism, but an act of deepest love. *She has done a good thing for me*, Jesus said. *She has done what she could: She has anointed my body for its burial. Where the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.*

Christianity, you see, is not about rules. That may be news to any of us who ever had to memorize a creed or recite a catechism, like I did as a Presbyterian. But if Christianity was just about remembering the rules, the disciples would have been right with their “Yes, but” attitude. But they were wrong. Christlikeness is not done by rules, it’s done by love. And this woman, this woman alone in that room, well, she got it. She got it.

Rules, let me tell you, are a lot easier.

But what Jesus asks us to do, what he was desperately needing someone to do on that evening long ago, is to step into every moment, every situation, asking yourself ‘what is **love** asking me to do?’ That woman stepped into that room and knew what love was asking her to do. No rules. Only love. She got that. She got that.

Last Sunday night, here at church, we discussed the book that the Town of Fairfield chose for its annual ‘One Town, One Book’ program. In the month of March, everyone in Fairfield has been invited to pick up a copy of the book ‘*Wonder*’ and give it a read, and talk about it – and so last Sunday night we did just that – and on Thursday night, the Quick Center had an overflow crowd of folks jammed in to listen to the author speak. It is a remarkable book, and you need to read it. It’s about a boy in middle school named August, Auggie, with a severe, hideous, facial deformity, and each section of the book is the voice of a different person encountering him, and his voice too.

The book, the author said, is a meditation on kindness; there is plenty of kindness *and* unkindness in its pages in the voices of the young people who encounter August. He is subjected to remorseless cruelty by fellow students. But there is one girl who strikes me as being a whole lot like the woman who cared for Jesus. In the lunchroom, on the first day of school – and really, are there any more awful words in *anyone’s memory* than ‘lunchroom, first day of school’ – in that room, this girl, Summer, picks up her tray of food and turns to see August at a table alone, eating his lunch and trying not to be hurt by the horrified stares of every other student. And Summer, breaking every rule of middle school popularity, breaking the *code*, walks over and joins him. And sits with him at every lunch from then on, baffling her rule-bound friends.

“Did the principal *ask* you to be friends with him?” her friend Charlotte asks later, trying to find some reason for this oddly accepting and caring behavior.

No, says Summer, nobody asked her to. In this marvelous book, Summer is the one who simply chooses to anoint August with extravagant love, with the gift of friendship, unconcerned with expectations, unswerved by naysayers and the “*yes, buts*” of others. She gets it. She just **gets** it.

There’s a video that’s been making its way around Facebook, has popped up on my page a bunch of times now. It’s wonderful. It’s a news story from Texas, about a basketball coach, and the choice he made for his team’s final home game. They had a young man on the team, developmentally disabled, a senior, who’d not gotten a whole lot of playing time. But the coach decided, even before the game, that no matter what the score, this boy, Mitchell, would play the last ten minutes of the game. It was his last home game.

And so the time came, and he put Mitchell in. And the crowd went wild, screaming his name, pouring out their love. And his teammates passed him the ball again and again. But every shot he attempted was an airball, or bounced its way off the rim. Brick after brick he threw up, and with five seconds to go, he tossed up a shot that was so far off the mark it just went out of bounds. And it was now the other team’s ball. That was it. Except – except this. The captain of the other team, who was the one to stand on the sideline and pass the ball in, who was, of course, expected to throw it in as quick as possible to his team’s best shooter, instead hesitated, looked, and then called out “Mitchell! Mitchell! Here you go!” and threw the ball to him. His opponent. And Mitchell – yeah, you guessed it, caught it, swiveled and tossed the ball into the basket to end the game.

That young man, that captain of the opposing team, well, he got it. He didn’t care about the rules of the game right then, he didn’t care that you’re supposed to play to win. He just did what Love was telling him to do. He got it. After the game, he was asked why he made that choice. And he looked at the reporter like, like ‘duh’ – and he said, “well, I was taught that you do for others what you would like others to do for you.” He gets it.

Friday night, two nights ago, over in an absolutely packed Memorial Room, this church held its annual Evening for Appalachia, an evening of fellowship and good food, and a whole lot of stuff that we auction off to raise much-needed funds to get our youth group to West Virginia this summer to fix homes. We’ve got 155 kids going this year, and sixty-two adults going with them – which, by the way, if you’re interested in, talk to me.

And on Friday we raised a whole lotta money, which was great. But I'll tell you what was really great – was listening to four kids – Julia, Brenna, Logan, Katie get up and talk to all us adults about why the Appalachia trip matters. They were all wonderful. They all get it. Logan said this – he said “People wonder why you would get in a bus for a day so that you can go sleep on floors somewhere. And they wonder why you want to spend a whole week, like, on a roof, fixing holes in the roof. Because it's really hot. I mean, it's really hot. And the work, it's pretty hard. It's really hard.” And then he paused and thought for a moment, and said, “But last summer I worked on the home of a man who was pretty disabled. He was a veteran, and something had messed up pretty bad. And we worked on his home, and he would come and work with us, and, you know, we fixed it up. And, um, that's, that's why it's the best week of the year.” He got it. They all get it. And listening to them speak, everyone in the Memorial room suddenly got it.

That's all Jesus is asking of us. That's all. Simple – but really hard. Just for us to get it. In every place we find ourselves, in every decision we face, to be the ones who aren't the dogmatists, who aren't the yes-buffers – but the ones who act in love, who listen to what Love is calling us to do and to be.

To get it.

To get it right.

Amen.