

A priest friend of mine in Boston is battling pancreatic cancer. He has faced his illness with grace and optimism, pursuing treatments and lifting other people up by his attitude. Friends and members of his church have been spending time with him, driving him places, and helping with his work. All of them are hoping for the best, but they are responding so generously because the illness is so serious. When someone you love faces a life-threatening situation, you may perform extraordinary sacrifices for that person. You may spend time you didn't know you had and money you thought you needed to save.

Apparently this is the situation of the woman who mysteriously appears at the beginning of Mark's account of the Passion of Jesus. A few days before his death, intuiting that Jesus' life is in danger, she walks into a men's club – dinner at the house of Simon the leper. She has with her a costly jar containing expensive perfume. She breaks the jar and pours the oil over the head of Jesus. The men are shocked. They accuse her of wasting money. At Passover people made donations to the poor, and the men try to impress Jesus by emphasizing in between courses of the meal how this woman should apportion her money.

Jesus says a surprising thing. He lets the woman off the hook. He tells the men, "the poor you will always have with you. . . but you will not always have me." He doesn't mean that poverty is inevitable, and there's nothing you can do about it. We certainly should do something about it. But Jesus interprets the woman's actions this way: she is a prophet; she is predicting his passion. He will not be physically with them much longer; now is the time to appreciate him, to listen to him, to watch him, and to proclaim who he is. In the Old Testament you poured oil over the heads of priests and kings. This woman continues the message of Palm Sunday, that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, our great high priest and the Son of David the King.

The perfume comes from a plant called "spikenard" because it has thorns resembling spikes. Perhaps Mark wants us to see another foreshadowing of the passion.

Palm Sunday reminds us to take the opportunities we have to lavish generosity on those who mean something to us. We hope that all the people we love will be with us for many more years, but if we learn they are in danger because of any threat to their life, our attitude toward them shifts, and our behavior toward them becomes more focused. How it would please Jesus if we treated everyone that way all the time – not just those we love, but those we don't even know, including the poor; and not just at the end of someone's life, but every day.