

“Rest as Resistance”

Matthew 26:6-13

Lent V: Rest

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Scripture: Now Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon with the skin disease, a woman came to him who had an alabaster vessel of extremely valuable balm, and she poured it on his head as he sat at table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “What purpose does this waste serve? For this could have been sold for much, and the money given to the poor.” But Jesus understanding, said to them, “Why are you making this trouble for the woman? She has done something good for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this balm on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

In Nashville, I lived just a few blocks from Vanderbilt’s campus, and so when I was in Divinity School, it became known that my housemates and I had a beautiful, cozy red couch. Grad school operated at a breakneck pace, and often, even people training to be pastors and chaplains and teachers who were used to caring for others, needed a reminder to slow down. So, when I would witness my peers working themselves toward exhaustion, I’d invite them to take a short walk over to my home and lay down on our couch for a while. And sometimes, when my friends would see me wearing my busy-ness like a badge, they’d say, “Hey, Anita, it’s couch time.”

Sometimes it is only when someone else notices me and witnesses my exhaustion that I finally give myself permission to rest.

I wonder if that is some part of what’s going on in this passage of scripture. Jesus has been working for three years straight in ministry—walking from town to town, inundated by crowds of people who need his attention in some way. The gospels tell us of multiple instances where Jesus tries to get away for a moment, tries to go on a mountain by himself, tries to take a nap, tries to find space for him to hear himself think...and then inevitably, those moments are thwarted by the needs of the people following him.

I imagine that Jesus was trying to balance various facets of his identity as he reclined at the table with his friends on the evening our scripture story takes place. In a way, he is being so human, sitting among his community and eating and drinking, perhaps taking time in the busy-ness of Holy Week to be in a small group instead of the crowds of Jerusalem. But, because in Matthew’s gospel, this story takes place during Holy Week, there is the backdrop of political machinations, scheming and plotting by people who didn’t like Jesus’ anti-empire ministry. There’s the context of Jesus trying to get his disciples to understand his mission and his identity that sets him apart...the identity that is a threat to the Roman empire and people with power threatened by his

popularity. As he does this tightrope act of balancing this precious time nearing the end of his mission with the political intrigue around him, he receives an incredible gift from a woman whose name has been lost to the narrative. And Jesus responds to the extravagant generosity of her bathing his feet with expensive perfume with gratitude, though his disciples do not understand. When the disciples witnessed this act of love, they immediately decried the waste, reprimanding the woman (and Jesus) by saying that the perfume in the fine alabaster bottle should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

And then Jesus says that phrase that has caused generations of biblical scholars and theologians and social ethicists and regular folks like you and me to pause: “you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

That's a really complicated statement. We don't know how to understand it. We wonder about Jesus' intent. We wonder about the gospel author's intent in including this story in their account of Jesus' life. We are forced to think about class and social and economic status, and that is particularly uncomfortable for people who, like we do, live in one of the wealthiest cities in the richest country in the world. We don't like thinking that there will always be poor people. Do there have to be poor people? Is it necessary to a society's structure that some people just have to be on the bottom rung of the ladder? Someone has to have the least, right? What are the alternatives? Socialism? Communism? How are we to understand Jesus' commentary that validates the unnamed woman's gift but has confounded the last two thousand years of Christ-followers?

And we must recognize that sometimes wealthy people or churches or countries use this phrase to imply that Jesus said that we didn't need to do anything about the poor because there will always be poor people. In *This Here Flesh*, Cole Arthur Riley reflects on the USAmerican labor system in this way: “we are expected to feel deeply lucky and even indebted to a society that allows us to work, even if that work cannot satisfy our most basic needs.”¹ Some people adopt this idea of “live and let live,” that poor people will exist so therefore we can't do anything to change that. That is an extraordinarily dangerous line of thought, akin to ignoring climate change because we are bound for a heavenly kingdom where the old earth will pass away. (!)

Friends, if we are going to talk about “the poor” (air quotes) then it is important to center the voices of people who are marginalized by empire, those living in under-resourced places, lacking access to basic necessities, and those who are pushed to the edges of society due to their race, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs or other identities. If we are going to talk about “the poor,” we must de-center the white, educated, middle- and upper-class dynamics that form the dominant lens through which we read the scriptures in this time and place within the USAmerican empire.

When I seek to de-center these dynamics, one place I turn to is the *Gospel in Solentiname*. You may be familiar with this work, compiled by the late Catholic priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, which relates conversations about the gospels with *campesinos*, peasants, in the Solentiname islands of Nicaragua during the Somoza dictatorship.

¹ This Here Flesh, p. 152.

Here's some of their commentary about our scripture passage today:

A man named Oscar said about the perfume in the alabaster jar, "If they'd sold it, it would have gone to only a small number of the poor, and the poor of the world are countless. On the other hand, when she offered it to Jesus, she was giving it, I his person, to all the poor. That made it clear it was Jesus we believe in. And believing in Jesus makes us concerned about other people, and we'll even get to create a society where there'll be no poor. Because if we're Christians, there shouldn't be any poor."

Later in the conversation, questioning the word "always" in the statement that the poor will "always" be with you, Father Cardenal said this: "As long as there are poor, they will always be among us, we shall not be separated from them. Because the Christian community must be with the poor."

A woman, Olivia, pointed out: "What that woman did was a lesson for us, and a reminder, so that what's spent in great temples that are good for nothing can be better spent on people, on the poor people he left behind. Now we do have to give to the poor, because the poor are present with us. What she had present was Jesus, his person; now we have him present but in the person of the poor."

Now, Jesus is present with us in the person of those who are poor. The *campesinos* in conversation with Father Cardenal also complicated the idea of what "poor" is referring to in the gospel text: not just poor monetarily, but who are without access to basic necessities, who are persecuted because of their identity, who are without meaningful relationships...there are many ways to be poor. They also named that there are people who are poor because they are working so hard to survive that even the idea of "thriving" is out of reach.

There is an idea that plagues USAmerican capitalism in particular that *rest has to be earned*. Have you ever been sucked into this ideology? This kind of thinking goes something like "I have to go above and beyond in X, Y, and Z ways before I take vacation" or "I haven't done enough to have a weekend, so I need to work" or even "*those people over there* are poor, so that means they don't work hard and they don't deserve rest." This is only furthered by the vacation policies that put the onus on people to justify their time off instead of guaranteeing a certain amount of time away as a right. This understanding of labor has been weaponized by white people and colonizing powers particularly against people of color and poor people in the pursuit of profit. The 8-hour work day and the five-day work week didn't come from nowhere—they are the results of decades of labor movements fighting for the right to rest.

Time off is a human right. Rest is a human right. As Cole Arthur Riley writes, "rest is not the reward of our liberation, nor something we lay hold of once we are free. It is the path that delivers us there."²

Turning back to our scripture for today, I wonder if the disciples were stuck in a scarcity mindset, like we talked about a few weeks ago. I wonder if they were bent on critiquing the woman's gift

² This Here Flesh, 151.

of anointing Jesus because they only saw the dollar signs and wanted to control the use of such a beautiful and special perfume. I wonder if the disciples tried to erase the significance of the woman's gift, disregarding the sacrificial act of love because they were too busy working their own idea of what Jesus' mission was in the world. But as they advanced their understanding of what was "worth" spending that costly oil on, they dismissed the inherent value in the woman herself and in the action of love. And Church, *I get it*. I think that we fall into that scarcity-mindset trap that caught the disciples: too often we focus on the numbers, the cost, the monetary worth of something and we do not focus on the human-heart aspect.

Even the author of the gospel dismissed the woman in a way. Though Jesus said that the woman's act would be remembered and her story told—*we don't even know her name*.

That tells us something about women's labor and rest, too. Much of what our society sees as "women's work" is unnamed, such as household chores and child-rearing, as well as emotional and relational labor. And much of what society sees as "women's work" is undervalued, such as childcare, teaching, cleaning and hospitality, nursing, and more. In 2021, the gender pay gap data continued to show that white women were paid just 73 cents on the dollar compared to white men, with Black women being paid 64 cents, Latina women being paid 54 cents and indigenous women being paid 51 cents on the dollar.³ Why does this matter, besides that it impacts people we know and love, people in this very church? Because when work is ignored, dismissed as less important, unnamed, or taken for granted, there is a high risk for exploitation.

What would it look like to honor Jesus' call to remember the woman who anointed him by recognizing women's labor that goes unnoticed and unnamed, and by drawing attention to the wage gap?

What did it mean for the woman in our scripture, that her care for Jesus was derided by the disciples? How did she feel, witnessing Jesus' need for rest and recognition of his ministry, only to be dismissed by those who were supposed to "get it"?

Perhaps she, like so many women--like so many people--today, was at risk of experiencing burnout.

Theologian, poet and activist Tricia Hersey founded "The Nap Ministry" in 2016 to lift up the truth that "rest is resistance." The Nap Ministry particularly centers Black women and LGBTQIA+ people. The Nap Ministry is active on Instagram, regularly posting reminders to dis-invest from "grind culture" that sees exhaustion as righteous, and instead rest body, mind, soul as an act of communal care. In a recent Instagram post, Hersey said this:

"Worker exploitation isn't discussed enough. Instead people keep screaming about burnout...[a] word I wish could be eliminated is burnout. It does not get to the heart of the issue. This culture prefers to give things shallow names in an effort to minimize. What if we started to say this when

³ <https://19thnews.org/2023/03/equal-pay-day-2023-charts-gender-pay-gap/#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20women%20are%20earning,barely%20budgeted%20in%2020%20years.>

speaking about our career/work life stress: “Trauma is showing up in my body and soul because this culture overworks us like machines.” Or, instead of saying, “I’m burned out,” say, “I have been traumatized by capitalism.””⁴

The fact that our scripture story today has been used to justify a culture where it is accepted that some people are poor, and does not include the name of someone who cared for Jesus so radically—that speaks to me about the possibility for “burnout” among those who follow the Way of Jesus and do not resist a capitalist culture, then *and* now.

In the gospel of Matthew, the supper where the woman approaches Jesus and anoints his body with expensive oil and perfume takes place during Holy Week. Her action, according to the gospel author, foreshadows Jesus’ burial that would not be done properly according to tradition because of his violent death at the hands of empire.

Part of the wonder of our scripture story today is in the fact that the woman *witnessed* Jesus. She understood something about him, she intuited something about him that his disciples, the people closest to him, had not figured out yet. She reflected back to him part of his purpose, she reflected back to him the care that he so freely gave to others...care for the body *and* care for the soul. In her dramatic and sensual act, the woman cared for the caretaker; ministered to the minister; prophesied to the prophet; taught the teacher. With her generosity, she literally poured out herself at Jesus’ feet, giving of her time and energy and labor to one who desperately needed rest. And she demonstrated to a community of Jesus-followers the type of labor that is so often dismissed, but that has profound impact.

The unnamed woman also defied empire in her act of care. She made sure that he would be anointed like the important, set-apart, Special Child of God that he was. She made sure that the proper time was taken to serve the servant. Though the empire would seek to steal Jesus’ dignity, degrade his body, shame and humiliate him and murder him...the community would care for him. Jesus’ destiny was not defined by the power of the empire over him.

Notice that we’re talking community care, not just *self*-care. This is a point that The Nap Ministry makes very clear. Because it is *a system* that threatens our wellbeing, we must band together *as a community system* to care for each other and thus to change the forces that steal our labor and the labor of those on the margins. We must join together in resisting the systems of empire, of capitalism, of white supremacy. We must resist the intoxicating pull of the Protestant Work Ethic and of the misguided and dangerous “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” ideology.

Tricia Hersey says, “The systems make us hard. Rest keeps us tender.”⁵

So let us rest, beloveds. Let us give each other permission to restore our bodies and souls. May we extend radical care for each other in ways that defy the empire that tries to divide and conquer, that wants to tire us out so we live as sleepwalkers. May we invite each other over to

⁴ 2/26 via The nap ministry on Instagram

⁵ The Nap Ministry, 2/3/23 on Instagram

rest our bones on the cozy red couch and to, as my beloved Tennessee church folk said, “rest a spell.”

As we approach Holy Week, in which we encounter the stories of the last days of Jesus’ life, I say: let all who labor, *rest*.

May it be so. Amen.

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“Because” (inspired by John 12:1-8, Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50)

because we have preserved our joy in manna jars for the long winter of despair,

storing them in the dark corners of our souls,

we have forgotten its gritty taste;

because we have put a tight lid on our joy,

and put it in the back of the pantry,

we have forgotten how it can tickle our noses;

because we are so busy prattling pious platitudes

about the poor, the least, the lost,

we ignore your words which anoint them as your children;

because we have put up the shutters and storm doors

to keep your future from sneaking in,

we have missed the sweet breeze carrying your hope to us;

because we are who we are,

restore us, Holy Grace, and make us

a fragrant offering to the world.