

Matthew 26:1-16:

Introduction:

Friends! Today's passage is exciting. It's exciting for a couple of reasons. In terms of things happening, events, it's exciting because it's a major transition in Matthew. We've just finished Jesus' last long time of teaching, his long fifth sermon, and today's passage marks the beginning of the end.

- **26:1-28:20: Condemnation, Death, Resurrection, Commission**
 - **26:1-16: Planning Arrest**
 - **26:17-75: Last Night**
 - **26:17-30: Passover**
 - **26:31-46: Resolve**
 - **26:47-75: Rejection**
 - **27:3-10: Judas**
 - **27:1-2, 11-66: Trial, Crucifixion, Burial**
 - **28:1-15: Vindication**
- **28:16-20: Commissioning**

It's also exciting because today's passage is one of the very, very few scenes that every one of the Gospel authors--Matthew, Mark, Luke, John--thought that their congregations needed to hear. It's one of the few scenes that's in every Gospel. So it's significant, you know?

We're going to treat it as Matthew presents it to us; I think it'll be worth our while.

The End's Beginning:

And what today's passage does more than anything else is set us up for Jesus' arrest. In today's passage

everything starts. It's the real beginning of the end.
Let's pray.

Prayer:

What's going on, again?

The first thing Matthew does in this section is remind us where we are, which is helpful, because as readers we may have lost the plot during Jesus' preaching/teaching time.

So where are we? It starts this way:

26 When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 2 "As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

Oh, right! Passover is two days away! A huge celebration--incredibly important celebration--is just a couple days away; Jerusalem will be flooded with religious, faithful people.

Now. Jesus has told his disciples repeatedly he's going to die. He's hinted at resurrection, but no one really expected it, at least in part because they didn't really expect him to die. Part of the tension we're supposed to be feeling as we read this grows up in the space between what we get, understand, and what the disciples don't.

And despite all that Jesus just said about his own

return in power, in judgment, in reward, as God's Agent--Daniel's "Son of Man"--even when he name drops this term for himself here, the disciples seem to just blithely ignore him!

But meanwhile, in a crowded room of the Chief Priest's palace, there's a secret meeting happening...

A Secret Meeting:

3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, 4 and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. 5 "But not during the festival," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."

So. Jesus' great antagonists, who he has repeatedly called children of the devil, enemies of God, model hypocrites, and unfaithful--the chief priests and elders--they go to their head-honcho, their gang leader's mansion, and begin to plan Jesus' death. Caiaphas, the Chief Priest who had taken over from his dad was, by all accounts, pretty savvy, knew how to keep his good thing going.

But we know one thing about these religious elites: They are scared of the people they claim they are leading. Over and over we've seen it. The people with power in Jesus' society were afraid of the people that they claimed to have power over. And we get a hint hear about why they are scared. They are scared

because they don't want the people to riot. But a riot isn't just something that has to be quelled; a riot could mean the end of their power. The entire power structure of Jerusalem depends on the ability of its puppet leaders to keep the peace, to not cause problems for Rome, because if they do, Rome will come in and shut it all down.

The truth is these leaders are savvy. They know that if a riot happens, they're done. They are again a bad example for us: Their eyes are on their power, their energy is spent trying to keep it from being taken away from them from underneath, by Jesus and his grassroots movement, and from above, by Rome. They'll fail on both counts within half a century, but right now they probably feel pretty good about things, in their crowded room, cigar smoke swirling up in the dim light. Not really, right? But that's the feeling of the thing.

And the scene shifts! Another crowded room, just outside Jerusalem, a different sort of meeting's taking place. We leave behind the evil men, leering and whispering about how they'll kill Jesus quietly, shore up their power.

A scene takes place, and it's really a scene, in the "You're making a scene!" sort of way. A woman comes to Jesus, while everyone's there at the table. They're on the outside patio. Simon is rich, even though he's a leper, and wealthy enough to become "the leper," you know, Bethany's token leper. A woman takes a jar,

incredibly expensive on its own, but worth even more because it's filled with rare, expensive perfume, and pours it over Jesus' head. A few ounces, tops, but the smell fills the patio, it's all over Jesus' hands as he instinctively pushes his hair back.

This happens:

A Public Meeting:

8 When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. 9 "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor."

10 Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 11 The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. 12 When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. 13 Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Let's hang out here for a moment, before we dart across to the next scene Matthew takes us to.

A Public Meeting: Disciples' Response

What I love about the disciples response to this, is how completely thoughtless it is. I mean, by calling what this woman did a "waste," they are totally dissing this

woman's incredibly costly gift, while she's standing right there, and at the same time, they're also dissing Jesus, whom she "wasted" it on, you know? It usually takes a lot more work to alienate people. I'm actually really impressed with their rhetorical skill.

They bother her, somehow. We don't know what they say, but it built on the whole "waste" thing. Maybe they call her foolish, shortsighted, a party-crasher. All she knew, though, was that she was giving extravagantly. She was giving an astonishingly extravagant gift, and getting hassled and dissed for it.

Their whole sense of being indignant--you know "Indignant," right? That sense that we've been treated unfairly, that we're put out, and so we're a little bit bitter and resentful--their whole sense of being indignant came from the fact that this extravagant act was, to their mind, basically impractical. They really did think it was a waste, right? They thought it would have been much wiser, much more in line with what Jesus was all about, much more reasonable to offer that expensive little bottle with the expensive little stuff inside it up on the market.

We get the sense that they're actively bothering the woman about this when Jesus interrupts them. And he just shuts them down, you know? Jesus interrupts them.

Public Meeting: Jesus' Response:

But he doesn't just interrupt them; really he corrects

them. He challenges their perception of the situation, and challenges their value system. He reminds them of the thing he's said over and over and over; that he's going to die soon, and in all of this, he does something that I think is pretty neat. The disciples are berating this lady, because of how she's used what she has to use, and they really don't see her use of this perfume as responsible, as worthwhile.

But Jesus places this woman's behavior within the context of his life story, and because of that, it has way more meaning, way more importance, than it would otherwise have. Does this make sense?

Her behavior becomes meaningful, beautiful, memorable and not a waste, because her actions form a part of Jesus' story. Jesus gives meaning to her act by incorporating it into his story. Her wasteful act becomes a generous one, becomes admirable, because she's thinking about him when the disciples aren't. And because of what she did, she herself becomes part of Jesus' story, never to be forgotten.

Public: Prophetic Act:

It's almost like what she does, Jesus turns into a prophetic act. In some ways Jesus turns her behavior, which was so extravagant, into one more sign of what's going to happen to him; and it's a sign that really, his disciples need to hear again. Because somehow, in that room, they've forgotten what's going to happen to Jesus. They've forgotten the Passover is in two days and Jesus is going to be crucified. They've

forgotten the plot of their own story.

Jesus' response--well, their response--really highlights just how shortsighted these guys are. Really just short sighted.

And they have an agenda in this moment, too, right? A good agenda, a great humanitarian agenda: they want to care for the poor.

Maybe they finally picked upon the fact that it's something Jesus cares about; it's just that, as usual, their timing is way off.

Public: Seeing Correctly:

And I should say that Jesus' response doesn't dismiss the need to care for the poor; he's recalling a truth from scripture, from the book of Deuteronomy, and he's not negating the need to give to the poor as Deuteronomy commands.

What he is doing is reminding his disciples that again, he's not always going to be around with them, that they should be paying special attention to God's whole agenda right now, not latching on to one small part of it. Jesus is drawing his disciples back to their moment in history, to their "right now," and by mentioning his funeral, he can remind them again of the death that they just don't want to accept.

If they were paying attention to what God was up to through him, they'd realize that the extravagant act of

this nameless woman is incredibly powerful, because she's the one who sees what God is up to, sees how it's Jesus' life, and death--his story--that gives her life its meaning.

The disciples aren't focused on Jesus right now; they're too busy crying over spilled perfume. They are focused on a well-intentioned idea whose timing is terribly. And the reason their priorities are messed up is because they've simply forgotten Jesus. They've ignored what he's been saying, and as a result, they've focused on the wrong things.

We could ask what we're growing indignant about. We could ask why we've prioritized the things we're prioritizing. Look, the disciples are getting things right here, but only partially. They aren't wrong about giving to the poor. But their timing is off. Good choices depend not only on Christ-like virtue, but on timing. This woman allowed Jesus' story, and what was happening in his life, to give her life meaning and direct her actions. The disciples have latched onto a very moral choice--generous giving to the poor--but in focusing on that good thing, instead of the good person who stands behind it, who is just about to die, they have chosen poorly, bothered someone else who chose wisely, set themselves up to be chastised by Jesus.

Are we at all focusing on a good thing at a bad time? We don't want to end up chastised; that's the Disciples job, you know? Be an example for us, so that we can,

you know, be more faithful. Let's try.

But one of them leaves this dinner and makes his way back to those whose scheming opened the story:

Judas:

14 Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests 15 and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. 16 From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Oh, Judas.

I think that Judas is not so much an evil, horrible man, as someone who expected Jesus to be a certain way.

All the disciples expected Jesus to behave in certain ways; we've seen this all throughout Matthew. But Judas was the one who couldn't let go of his expectations, and I don't know why, but this incident, with this woman seems to be the last straw for him. He could no longer support this Messiah, who doesn't seem to even care about poor people. I mean come on, right? And all he does is talk on and on about his death, and there's this lady whose wasting cash--I mean every organization needs capital--it is a waste making Jesus smell pretty. His indignation was too great; Jesus had pushed the line too much, it wasn't going to work with him in charge; he has to be

removed.

I think Judas felt like if it was going to work, this change in the order of everything, if it was really going to work, then Jesus needed to be removed.

And we may respond in shock, we may posture a bit, get a little indignant, at what Judas did “Well. He didn’t need to hand him over to be killed.”

Fair. But has anyone in here ever known the anger of being failed by another person? Of having some hero, or person whom you’ve hoped in, so deeply, had them fail you. A friend, a partner, someone who intimately shares your life and your convictions--you thought--who cares about God--you thought. If you’ve been failed by someone like that, all you want to do is get that person out of your sight.

So sure, here, Sunday morning, our souls are right with the Lord, we’ve prayed and given over ourselves to the Holy Spirit, and invited God to rule our minds and hearts through song and offering...we can’t imagine, right now, ever wishing another person harm.

But it’s said that indifference is the real opposite of love, not hate, and when someone fails me, it takes all my effort to care what happens to them. It takes a force of will.

I don’t think Judas is out to kill Jesus, not really: He just want’s him gone. Matthew takes pains, in fact, not to

mention death or killing in this last paragraph. He did in the first paragraph of this opening. It would make really good literary symmetry to include a mention of the religious leaders, and the mention of death in both the opening and conclusion to today's passage, wouldn't it?

I think Judas is simply out to get rid of Jesus. He simply wants Jesus, who has clearly failed him, out of his sight; If the priests kill him, whatever; at least he's not in Judas' universe anymore. Right?

Or am I making all this up? Have we never felt that way about friends who have hurt us, colleagues who have betrayed us, old church folk who have abandoned us? Is it really so different? Or was Jesus joking when he said, earlier, that to hate someone is to commit murder. "We don't hate them; we just don't care if they exist."

Judas: Betrayal

Jesus had gone too far, his ideals weren't right, his perspective was too skewed. Judas didn't betray Jesus when he turned their close relationships into a commodity that he could sell, and then sold it. He betrayed Jesus when he decided not to consider, to think about, Jesus' perspective on himself, on worship, on what was appropriate and fitting for a person to do in God's Kingdom, what was appropriate and fitting for the Messiah to say and do and be.

Judas' great betrayal happened when he decided not

to allow Jesus' opinions and perspectives on things to transform his own. When he decided to read Jesus in light of his own story, instead of allow Jesus' life to change his. Hear me: Judas' betrayal started when he decided to read Jesus in light of his own story, instead of allowing Jesus' life to change his own. The rest of the disciples were, more often than not, oblivious. They latched on to the "care for the poor" thing at the worst moment, but they didn't cling to it; they left themselves open to Jesus' interruption and correction. Judas rejected it.

Jesus just didn't live up to his standards. And that was too much for him to deal with. He sells Jesus. He goes on to kill himself. And it is a great, pitiable shame. Because he never really understood grace; he never really realized that even if Jesus isn't acting the way he expected or wanted the Messiah to act, every action Jesus took and word he said was motivated by a great love, even for Judas.

I don't think Judas was beyond salvation, beyond being touched by the love of God even after he had sold Jesus into his death; but because of his unmet expectations, because of his frustration and indignation, he simply didn't allow Jesus to redemptively shape the story of his life.

Conclusion: Question

I ask us, often, to remember God's faithfulness to us. It's critical, right? It's fuel for our own responsive faithfulness.

I want us this morning, if we need to, to remember our indignation. I want us to remember those times where God hasn't lived up to our expectations.

I want us to remember those times where God hasn't lived up to our expectations. And I want to ask us this, if we remember: Have we dealt with those emotions? Have we worked through any of the difficulties that indignation may have caused us?

Is God not living up to our expectations right now?

How can we be a place where our love is contagious, where we have any desire to look more like Jesus, if there are hard spots in our souls, little caves where we stuff small little packages of Indignation, resentment, that sense that we have been failed? We can't be.

We don't tell people about them too much, those places; or, if we do, we use generalities. We end up singing songs about how great God is, but keeping tight hold on all the little ways that God's failed to meet our expectations, and we are indignant about it, and our indignation grows into bitterness, and our bitterness into coldness, and then we become little robots who behave very well, and serve pretty well, but don't believe much, don't trust much. We become puppet masters for ourselves, controlling our behavior and showing up and doing all the right things, but inside just, angry. And anger always comes out.

I don't want to be a puppet. I want to be a real boy. I do.

We need to take some fearless self-inventory, I think.

Conclusion: Inventory

We need to ask ourselves so many things, you know? What little scripted-out plans do we carry around in us about the way things will be, or the way things should be, so that in the end, when our our scripts aren't followed, we end up angry producers, throwing tantrums? If we are depending on God to play a role in the script we've written for our life, then we've confused ourselves with the creator of the universe, and that ends up in hate, indifference, and now and then, murder.

Whose story determines how we respond to the world and all the people in it? Whose story determines how we respond to the world and the people in it?

Conclusion: Who shall we be?

Jesus received an extravagant gift from a woman whose actions were unreasonable, were impractical: But she was taking part in the story of God's work on behalf of the world. The Disciples were off, as they so often were, unable to see God at work in front of them because they didn't know when the right thing was better than the wise thing. They were focusing on a good thing at a bad time, and ended up chastised for it. They learned, eventually, though.

Judas couldn't deal with it. He couldn't deal with Jesus being the Messiah he was, couldn't deal with God working in the way that God was working, and his indignation, his inability to live by God's script instead of his own, led to two deaths, Jesus' and his own. The religious elite, so concerned about their power and its protection are today's passages non-starters: God isn't even in the picture, only their anxiety-driven self-protection is.

How can we be the woman who wasn't wasteful, because she was responsive to God? How can we avoid the way of the disciples, so concerned about what was right that they ignore how the wrong thing can be right to, sometimes, if Jesus is in the middle of it. How can we reject the way of Judas, who was so disappointed in Jesus he just wanted him dealt with. How can we manage our disappointments?

If there are things you need to deal with, please deal with them. If there is something extravagant you need to do, please do it. If you've been living like a producer, demanding that people live up to the script you've written--please stop it, and lets let God produce something through us that won't meet any of our expectations, but I am sure will surpass all of them, to His glory, our good, and our neighbors', too.