During Lent we retrace the path that led Jesus to the cross. We become eyewitnesses to the denial of Peter, the betrayal of Judas, the faithlessness of all the male disciples who desert Jesus in his hour of need. But this morning I would like to preach on the witness of this unnamed woman recounted in our Gospel lesson. While the stories of Judas and Peter are engraved in the memory of Christians, the story of this unnamed woman is virtually forgotten. Even though Jesus says “wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told in memory of her”, this woman’s compassionate and prophetic action has not been remembered much less celebrated. On this Sunday in which we join the larger church in celebrating the gifts of women, let us remember her, let us tell her story, let us learn from and celebrate her compassionate witness to Jesus in his hour of need. Mark’s Gospel holds up this woman as the paradigm of the true disciple.

For some days now in Jerusalem, Jesus and the discipleship community have been engaged in conflict with the powers that be and the struggle was taking its toll. All of them knew full well that they had a price on their head and that it was only a matter of time before the authorities would take action against them. Here in Bethany was a welcome moment to rest, to strategize, and to think clearly if they were to avoid a disaster. In all four Gospels, the village of Bethany is portrayed as a place where gracious hospitality was offered and received; Bethany was a place where in the safety of a home and in the intimacy of table fellowship, Jesus and the disciples could retreat and be renewed. And then it happened – a woman anointed Jesus with oil. Mark's story provides us with no information about this unnamed woman who stepped up to Jesus and broke open an alabaster jar. But if we let ourselves, we can almost imagine her. She does not know how to love him; she only knew that she did love him deeply and profoundly. By his words He has moved her and by his wisdom and compassion he has transformed her very being. She sought now only to be faithful to Him and to this new way of being that he has opened up within her. She does not know how to do that exactly but she can see that he suffered. And so she acted, and as she rose and crossed the room she crossed the very real social boundaries that separated men and women in Jewish society. She broke open the alabaster jar, an act of extravagant waste, and she touched the head and hair of a man she does not know; intimate expressions that were strictly taboo and for which she could be punished. Not only has she made herself vulnerable before those gathered there, but also she has publicly identified herself with a marked man who is being sought by the authorities.

The woman anointed Jesus with oil and the fragrance that immediately permeated the room tells everyone there that this is nard, imported from India, so expensive that it would cost a year's pay for the common laborer. Mark has offered us a very potent symbol in this story of the anointing in Bethany. To be anointed with oil was rich Judaic tradition reserved for the coronation of a new king. Being anointed with oil was the sign of God's favor, symbolizing the royal power being bestowed on the head of the nation's ruler. And yet here Mark tells the story of an anointing of a very different kind: This anointing takes place not in the temple, but in the house of a leper. This anointing is performed not by the high priest but by an anonymous woman. This anointing is done not in celebration but as preparation for burial. This anointing is greeted not with applause but with criticism. Who is this that is being anointed? What kind of king is being crowned?
The grumbles and gasps that are heard in the room, the stern, unforgiving looks that point like daggers at the woman all tells us something about what is going on in the minds of the male disciples. What lies underneath the hostility of the disciples toward the woman might just be their deep fear about what is about to happen to them and to their leader. The compassionate action of this unnamed woman is a prophetic sign, naming what the rest of the disciples refused to face – that their king would suffer and die. She by her courageous and compassionate action has broken the silence and the denial of what the future holds for Jesus and his disciples. The male disciples mutter to themselves and grumble out loud. Not only does she have the impertinence to approach the Rabbi but also she anoints his hair with the oil. And the extravagance of this: this oil could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. Mark’s Gospel does not single out a single critic thereby suggesting that the criticism was coming from the whole community.

If we think about it this is not at all surprising; the male disciples have simply not understood the Gospel from the beginning of the story. James and John had already asked Jesus to be able to sit at his right and left hand when he came into his glory and established his rule. Peter said to Jesus that you are the messiah the Anointed one but then rebuked Jesus when he spoke of his suffering and cross. And then of course there is Judas Iscariot. Judas has long fascinated me. I imagine that he was one of the most able of Jesus’ followers, the best and the brightest of the lot. He was outraged at the oppression of the nation by the Roman Empire. He was genuinely moved by the plight of the poor and has clear ideas about what must be done. He felt all along that this Nazarene could be the one the people have been waiting for. But of late, he had more and more doubt. Not only did Jesus not reject this wasteful extravagance; he welcomed it with more gloomy words about being anointed for burial. In the eyes of Judas, Jesus seemed bent on a course for self-destruction. Well, for Judas the struggle must go on. If Jesus wanted to be martyred, let it be. Perhaps, He will be more important to Israel as a dead martyr than a living leader.

“Leave her alone.” Jesus said. The story offers us the perspective of Jesus on this provocative act. Why do you bother her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. Can we hear the emotion in Jesus’ words, as he gives himself to the soothing relief of the oil in his hair, to the tenderness and comfort of feminine touch? Can we imagine the gratitude that he must feel for this moment of intimacy in the midst of a struggle that will cost him his life? And, can we empathize with the deep weariness and anger that rose within him at those who had followed him from the beginning but still did not understand him or his mission. Jesus already understood I believe that in the crisis ahead, all of these men, his followers would betray, deny and desert him. And so he turned to them and said "Leave her alone, why do you trouble her. The poor you will have with you always but you will not always have me."

More than once I have heard this verse quoted as justification for the church not being involved in social justice and the struggle against poverty. There are countless verses in the Bible, which call on the people of God to serve the poor and to work for justice, and yet the church has seized on this verse and a misinterpretation of it at that, to justify resignation in the face of poverty. These words by Jesus actually reveal the basic assumption of the community gathered around Jesus, that their ministry with and for the poor was the constant assumption behind their work. The disciples’ criticism of the woman's extravagance is understandable only if ministry to the poor was the obvious focus of their community. But Jesus says that there are moments when the community must be more than its public mission. A true community shares more than an agenda or commitment to social change. Even in the midst of the struggle, a true community must be one in which we minister to one another, sharing one another's pain. A true community becomes like Bethany, a place where we are known in our pain and ministered to with intimate tenderness and extravagant compassion. Have we been extravagant in our love for one who is
suffering? Have we nurtured the possibility of intimacy in our lives, our families and faith community, in our relationship to God?

What more can we learn about God from the feminine witness of one who was passionate, tender, and loving friend of Jesus? And Jesus said, “She has done what she could”. She has done what she could. If only every disciple would do this much - what they can do. May we also be remembered as disciples who did what they could. And Jesus said, “She has anointed my body for burial”. The prophetic action of the unnamed woman revealed her willingness to break out of the denial that enveloped the discipleship community. She was willing to name and acknowledge the reality that would surely come. In all these ways and more, the faithfulness and compassion of this unnamed woman is held up to us in Mark's story as a paradigm for authentic discipleship. This is a very important feminist sub-theme that runs throughout Mark’s story of discipleship. Throughout the gospel, women are held up as models of what it means to be a disciple. The men on the other hand are constantly failing to get what this is all about. Jesus constantly asked them: “do you have eyes to see and ears to hear?” But the women disciples who had accompanied Jesus from the earliest days in Galilee, to this moment in Bethany would continue on faithfully to the foot of the cross. The women are there but the men are nowhere to be found. And because the women will be the ones who will attend to the burial of Jesus, they will be the first witnesses of the resurrection. But the point of all this is not male bashing. Mark's story suggests that in a mysterious way, intimacy and betrayal are interconnected in the heart of every disciple. Intimacy and betrayal are two threads that are woven together into the fabric of Mark’s story of discipleship. And the capacity for intimacy and betrayal are interwoven in us as individuals, and as a community. But the Gospel in truth and love seeks to remind us of both. We cannot forget that at the Last Supper Jesus told all the male disciples that there was a betrayer at the table. And they all asked, “is it I?” And we know that it was finally all of them. All of them and all of us have the capacity to betray our Lord. But let us also remember the true faithfulness revealed in this unnamed woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany.

Jesus said that her story would be told for all time. Have we told the story? Why not? Is it because we still do not understand or appreciate the power of the feminine witness; a ministry of compassion that continues to be upheld and celebrated in the life of the church primarily through the faithfulness of women disciples. “What she has done will be told in memory of her”. To remember this unnamed woman is to remember all the forgotten women disciples who have carried forward her story through the centuries. It is to remember and lift up the qualities of their discipleship that are so needed in our church and in our world today and yet have often been pushed to the side and shut down. We remember and tell her story until that day when men and women are finally a true discipleship community of equals. All men and women in the church need to remember her and tell her story until we understand more deeply our own capacity for intimacy and betrayal. We tell her story in order to learn how we can be a community that fosters intimacy and support and tender compassion not just in our world but also to one another. We remember her and tell her story until we learn to offer compassionate solidarity to the Christ who still suffers in our world.