



## Week Four

# The First Dinner: Risking Rejection

**Open the Gathering with Prayer** ~ Choose your own or read Psalm 23 responsively.

**Gathering Prompt** – *choose one invitation to start connecting with each other and the week's themes.*

Is there a story that you enjoy telling “in memory” of someone? Or a story you tell about someone in your life that captures “who they are” in a special way? Share a brief version of that story with the group.

Think back over the giving you have done in your life. Have you ever felt compelled or called by God to give someone something? Describe giving something that brought you great joy to give. When have you ever given a gift that was received with extreme gratefulness? What was that like?

**Overview** – *a short summary of the chapter to remind participants of the main themes.*

*Story* ~ The story of the woman anointing Jesus is told in all four gospels. Although the details vary, each story “concerns a single woman, distinguished from among the more privileged people, who displays an extravagant gift.” In each version, the woman is silent and “Jesus honors her by valuing her action” (p. 95).

*Scriptural Precedent* ~ The word *christos*, which is where we get the word “Christ,” means “the anointed one.” Anointing occurs on several occasions in Hebrew scriptures: there are kings, priests, pillars and altars as well as corpses that are anointed in the Old Testament. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus states that “she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial,” but she anoints him on the head, which is the anointing of a king.

*Social Context* ~ Many of Jesus’ followers were women, however, very few of their stories are recorded in the gospels, and if they are, they are not recorded in much detail. We know that some of Jesus’ female followers owned their own property, had access to their own money and acted as patrons of the early Jesus movement. Unlike the widow who, we are told, gave all she had to the temple treasury, we do not know the financial situation of the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet. Jesus focuses on the woman’s action and intention, not her social circumstances.

*Significance* ~ Jesus' followers condemn the women's action, but Jesus praises it. He highlights the significance of her extravagant gift to the narrative of his coming death. She is one of many unnamed women who played a key role in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Without Jesus explaining her role to those at the dinner, she may not have been remembered and her story may not have been told. Levine invites us to remember the many other women in Jesus' life who remain unnamed and unremembered.

**Inquiry** – *initial questions, thoughts, new ideas arising out of the reading.*

- What details about the story of the woman anointing Jesus that Levine unpacks in this chapter were new or interesting to you?
- How have these details enriched, shaped or challenged your understanding of this story?
- If you put yourself in this story, where are you? What draws your attention? What might you think / feel about the woman's actions and Jesus' words if you were there?

**Scripture** – *re-read a key scripture passage together.*

Read **Mark 14:3–9** (NRSV) – the translation Levine uses in the book (p. 91–92).

AND

Read **John 12:1–8** (NRSV) – the translation Levine uses in the book (p. 92).

**Discussion** – *questions related to the scripture passage.*

In this chapter, Levine encourages us to appreciate the different perspectives offered by the different gospel writers. She explains, “We might think of these four accounts as variations on a theme. . . All the variants are ‘correct’ in that each one has the same basic structure, and all are different. The Gospel writers sing the good news with their own rhythms, and we should appreciate them all” (105).

In this spirit, take time as a group to compare the differences between the gospel accounts of this story from Mark and John.

- What is the setting in each of the passages?
- Who is the woman who anoints Jesus? How does she enter the setting?
- How does the woman anoint Jesus?
- What are the reactions of those at the dinner?
- What is Jesus' reaction?
- What words does Jesus use?

Are you noticing anything about the different themes that each gospel writer focuses on? What appear to be their interests? What different points are made by each gospel writer's choice of detail and perspective? What would we be missing if we only had one version? How do these differences enrich our understanding of Jesus' mission? What do they contribute to our understanding of the overall passion narrative?

Levine remarks that it would be nice if Lenten observances started with a “first supper”—a celebration of the woman who anoints Jesus (92). Who are the other women in the passion narrative whose roles are/should be celebrated? Imagine the other women who might have been

there whose stories have not been recorded. How does it change your perception of the passion story to think that there were many women surrounding Jesus in the last week of his life?

**Living Practices** – *practices connected to the theme for participants to engage in between sessions.*

*“During Lent you have the opportunity to think about your life alongside the life of Jesus, inviting inward transformation and then outward action” (Levine, p. 13).*

*Giving* ~ The woman who anoints Jesus provides him with an intentional and generous gift. It is a financial gift (she anoints with “costly ointment of nard”), but also a gift of service (she anoints his “body beforehand for its burial”). In doing so, she plays a key role, perhaps without even knowing or understanding the extent of it, in Jesus’ mission. We are also called to participate in Jesus’ mission by giving generously from our resources. Giving, along with prayer and fasting, is one of three spiritual practices traditionally emphasized during Lent. This week, spend time reflecting on your giving practices: How are you generously sharing your resources of time, talent, and/or treasure?

- Spend time in prayer asking God to speak to you about being a good steward of the gifts you’ve been given. Invite God to show you ways to be generous this Lent. Watch for those opportunities and act on them.
- Visit The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s stewardship webpage entitled “Talking about Gifts”: [presbyterian.ca/plannedgiving/talking-about-gifts](http://presbyterian.ca/plannedgiving/talking-about-gifts). Spend time there exploring the various resources, reading about the missions and ministries Presbyterians support, and learning more about how Jesus talked about giving.

**Close the Gathering with Prayer** ~ *Choose your own or say the Lord’s prayer together.*

