

Sermon given at Evening Prayer, September 24, 2025  
General Chapter Retreat, Society of the Holy Trinity  
Texts: Mark 14: 1-11, Hebrews 10: 15-25  
Preacher: The Rev'd Pari R. Bailey, STS

In 1983, German theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza published her landmark book entitled, “In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins.” The book’s name is drawn from this passage in Mark 14, as well as its synoptic parallels in Matthew 26 and Luke 7. These unnamed women—possibly sinful, possibly one woman but maybe three, possibly Mary of Bethany as in John 12—this poor woman whom men have obscured and misnamed and conflated and ascribed sexual sin to—let us remember her, sisters and brothers, as the paragon of selfless service, of feminine devotion, as lover par excellence.

And let us also read Hebrews Chapter 10 through that same critical theory lens, using this woman’s service as an inspiration to provoke one another to love and good deeds, pouring ourselves out in memory of she who is unnamed, but not unremembered.

This is how I was taught to interpret these passages, at least in my formal theological instruction.

Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Reuther were constant companions in my undergrad work and at seminary. And how many times have you heard these or similar Scriptures preached this way? Oh, perhaps not with the feminist flavor of the heady 1980s, but focused on our verbs: considering, provoking, encouraging. People who, like the woman, came, broke, poured. Don't count the cost. Don't complain about waste. Don't neglect. Don't be a Judas. Don't be the Pharisees or the chief priests, standing and sneering. Instead, give everything! Hold nothing back! Pour yourself out in service to...*fill in the blank*. The marginalized, the oppressed, the historically underrepresented, the de-centered. Even the garden-variety poor.

For thirty years—my entire ministry—I have had the good news preached through me instead of to me. Thirty years of feminist interpretation, liberation theology, decolonize something or other, stand up to hate, dismantle racism, know better/do better. Every judicatory meeting, every assembly, every text study was de-formed with the focus on our actions.

Church councils and bishops and district presidents and wellness wheels and seven habits of highly effective whatevers—we rotted from the inside out. And then it became truly demonic: we stared at ourselves in the mirrored rectangle of the Basilisk in our pocket, until now we are slaves to the Machine and servants of Algorithm Almighty.

I don't know about you, but I have poured out just about all I can, and in the Year of our Lord 2025 am scraping the bottom of the jar, trying hard not to phone it in, attempting to avoid letting the blue flame of cynicism consume me and everything I touch. Sort of attempting. Kind of.

I am tired, sick to death of the wars both theological and political, fearful of what is coming—and indeed something wicked this way comes; the blood-dimmed tide is loosed. The last two weeks have shown us that.

I'm haunted by the knowledge that if I get hit by a sugarbeet truck, or my innards stop trying to kill me and actually succeed, my bishop will attempt to “fix” my congregation, bring it in line with the prevailing ethos of the Brave New Church, and will probably succeed. And in a hundred years, who will remember me, broken and dried up like a potsherd, nameless woman preaching in a dwindling church, member of a dwindling denomination, secretary of a dwindling Society?

Yet.

Yet.

*Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you, says the Lord. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.*

*Yet. I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.*

We pastors in here, in our sin and our anxiety, we get the direction wrong. Always banging on about our faithfulness. Leave the ELCA, join the NALC! Leave them both, go Missouri! Home to Rome! Swim the Bosphorus? That's not preposterous! Hunker down. Be liturgically correct, and surely we'll be faithful. Or if not, then least we'll be properly vested and look nice. And—surprise!—the Holy Spirit's desires end up looking exactly like our own, just tarted up with some elevated language and ecclesiastical bits.

Look, we only hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering because He who has promised is faithful. That's it. That's all. Everything—literally everything—hangs on the one who promises that He will remember me, and you. The One who knows your name even when it's lost to time. Who has engraved you with nails on the palms of His hands, hidden you in the wound in His side, washed your body with pure water and sprinkled your heart clean with His own blood.

It's not the alabaster jar of your life, containing whatever you think is costly, that matters. The only breaking open that performs any good and beautiful service is the Body of Christ broken for you. It's not the financial price of the ointment, it's the prodigal waste of the Anointed One's own blood. The מִשַׁח (mashach) of the מְשִׁיחַ (meshiach), the blood that is upon us and upon our children, the High

Priest that opens a living way to the sanctuary through the curtain of his own torn flesh.

As Yeats so famously wrote, *things fall apart; the center cannot hold*. The falcon has flown off to wherever rebellious birds go. *The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity*. The blood-dimmed tide may be loosed, yes--but you are washed in another tide, flowing from His pierced side, while the fragrance of His burial and your chrismation into His death hangs heavy in the air. Death's dread angel sheaths his sword and you pass over from death to life, led dry shod through the Red Sea.

This is how you hold fast, by the power of the One held fast upon the Tree. This is the confession of our hope: anchored on the solid rock of Golgotha, the place of the skull of the old Adam and the New. These are our good deeds—planted like a Tree in the dirt of the Garden of Eden, of Gethsemane, of Calvary. Good only because they arise from the One who in the beginning saw that it was good, and became our sin to make it so forever.

When you waver—and you will, we cowards always will—it is His unfaltering faithfulness to you that will conquer the evil conscience that whispers at you in the hours at night when sleep flees. When you neglect—to meet together, to speak the truth, compromising with all the petty evils and stupid sins, perverse

and foolish—He will not neglect to seek you in love and has home rejoicing brought you.

This woman's anointing of Jesus--His head, His feet, washing Him with her tears, drying Him with her hair; Notorious sinner, or just a secret one, like all of us; Many women, one woman, one story, four gospels—no matter. She knows who she is: nameless sinner; *Foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die*. She knows who He is and she knows what He's come for: *gives His body for the feast, Christ the Victim, Christ the Priest. Alleluia*.