

Leave Her Alone
First UMC of Pocatello
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 27, 2022

John 12:1-8 (Jesus)

At our church's United Women in Faith meeting this past Wednesday morning (which is the new name for United Methodist Women), someone raised a very legitimate question about why God allows us to suffer – and not just to suffer, but to suffer for much longer periods of time than seem justifiable, given God's character. Personally, I believe that only the person suffering has the right to say what the meaning of their wrestling match with life is, but, as a pastor, I also know that there are more and less helpful lines of thought one can take. For example, a remarkable suggestion that was lifted up by a member of the women's circle was that our own pain has the capacity to draw out the kindness of others. We become a blessing in our neediness, because our needs awaken the compassionate qualities in others who might not otherwise have recognized or exercised those qualities in themselves. Not only did I find that to be a wise and humble reflection on suffering, but it also resonates with this Gospel story we've been spending so much time with during Lent.

Once again, we have come to the town of Bethany, to the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, a house that is filled with the fragrance of Mary's perfume. I have tried to emphasize in each of the previous sermons the particular gift that Jesus receives from each of his friends. From Lazarus, Jesus receives a promise of God's death-defying power. From Martha, Jesus receives a friendly welcome, an open door, a soft cushion, a full table. From Mary, Jesus receives an extravagant, costly anointing. The moments and acts that render these gifts of solace and hospitality and blessing, they fuse into an enduring memory that will

sustain Jesus' heart as he heads toward Jerusalem and all that awaits him there. This night feeds his dream, for which he is willing to offer his life, that there could be more homes like this one upon the earth.

We *cannot* forget that Jesus has come to this house after a prolonged period of hiding. Ever since he raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus has been hunted by the chief priests and the Pharisees. “[F]rom that day on they planned to put him to death,” the scripture says (John 11:53). Within the walls of this home, Jesus may be desired, loved, and showered with blessing, but beyond the walls, murderous intentions abound. His fate has already been decided by his own people's most powerful political council. We *must not forget* that it is Jesus' poverty – manifested in his spiritual foreboding, his bodily weariness, and his public rejection – that have elicited tenderness and love in his friends.

To bless such poverty, humiliation, and presumptive failure in the Messiah is precisely what Judas cannot or will not do. So, he criticizes Mary's offering, claims that the perfume could've been sold for a whole lot of money which then could've been given to the poor. Jesus comes immediately to Mary's defense in order to set the record straight about who he is, and why what has been done for him at this table is completely appropriate – is, in fact, the design which will set the pattern for all true Christian community.

Leave her alone. She has kept this for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.

Strangely and sadly, this verse has been interpreted by Christians throughout the Church's history in a way that actually justifies neglecting the poor. “Well, Jesus said the poor will always be here. Aren't worship and devotion like Mary's important, too? Let's pull our resources and build something truly extravagant for him. Afterwards, there will be plenty of time and opportunity to serve.” But this is to misunderstand what Jesus means. Mary's perfume is *poured out*. It cannot be gathered back again into the empty jar. It is “lost” – sacrificed

– in the act of anointing. Following Mary’s example requires making a lavish offering that is here today and gone tomorrow.

Plus, when Jesus says that the poor are always with us, he’s referencing a teaching straight out of the Law of Moses in the Old Testament. The teaching comes from a section in Deuteronomy that is proscribing laws for the Sabbatical year. Just as every seventh day was designated as a day of Sabbath rest for the Israelites, so every seventh year was designated as a year of societal rest, a year for the systematic eradication of poverty through generous giving and universal, no-strings-attached debt forgiveness. Along with some visions from the prophet Isaiah, the Sabbatical Year is the Old Testament’s most explicit vision of what it would look like for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Deuteronomy 15:9 and 10 command the people, “Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, *Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.*” In other words, because human beings will always have needs, God’s people should never cease to give, should always move through life with open hands. And their hearts – our hearts – should be in it. We should give freely, liberally, ungrudgingly.

Jesus’ first public sermon ever was about the Sabbath year and how its promises of forgiveness and freedom were being manifested in the world through his life. He is Jubilee in the flesh! So, clearly, Jesus isn’t suggesting to Judas, or to us, that it’s okay to neglect the needs of the poor so long as the extravagant work we’re engaging in is done “for him” or “in his name.” Instead, he says quite clearly, “You won’t always have *me*. I’m the poor one in this very house, at this very table, before your very eyes.”

For Judas, the poor seem to be a faceless mass that he thinks about abstractly and wants to help not with any sort of meaningful contact but with a lump sum. In some ways, it's much more difficult to come kneel at the feet of a neighbor whose name and needs you know, and give up the most precious thing you possess. But for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, Jesus is God present to the world in lowliness and vulnerability; he is life itself being lived under a death sentence. To this One who has emptied himself of all glory and strength, who has come to be numbered among the transgressors, crucified between criminals, joined to the fate of the poor, they desire to give their very best in return, to lavish with love and anoint with costly oil.

Jesus wants to protect their right vision. "Leave her alone!"

He is *intensifying* the law of Moses, driving to its very heart: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth ... Open your hand to the poor..."

"The poor, Judas? I'm right here in front of you."

Jesus commends Mary for keeping her perfume for the day of his burial. The word that's here translated as "keep" is a common word in the New Testament. It suggests a kind of careful observation, so it gets translated in lots of ways depending on the context: to keep, watch, guard, observe, obey. In the Gospel of John, the word is used frequently in a spiritual sense. Over and over, Jesus encourages his disciples to "keep" his words and his teachings – "keep" in the dual sense of remembering and doing. For example, he says to them, "If you love me, keep my commandments."

Mary, however, has kept her perfume – a physical thing. And the only other place this happens in John's Gospel is at the beginning, after Jesus has turned water to wine at the wedding in Cana, and the wedding steward, shocked and overjoyed, praises him for "keeping" the good wine until later in the party. There's a definite harmony between these

two moments of abundant blessing that bookend Jesus' ministry. Each is an act that *fills the house*, that prolongs and deepens the joy of human gathering. Each is an act overflowing from a heart that has kept the inner vision of God's humble incarnation.

Someone once asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus answered with a story about a man beaten while walking the road out of town. The neighbor, of course, is the one who walks that same road, who doesn't look past what is obvious. The neighbor dresses the man's wounds, carries him to safety, pays for his treatment and his stay. With no reservations or calculations, the neighbor betters the one life he knows he can better while there is still time.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.