

Sunday, April 3, 2022

Something Beautiful for God
John 12:1-8

Jesus is at dinner with his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom he has raised from the dead. Martha served and Mary does something so amazing, so out of the ordinary, so extravagant that we lose our breath. She anoints the body of Jesus with a bottle of expensive perfume. What an act of beauty for Jesus. What a friendship between Mary and Jesus. I think we have often overlooked the virtue of the beautiful and the importance of Jesus as friend. Our churches have so emphasized belief that we neglected relationship. "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" – how beautiful. Just as we smile and feel warm all over, John inserts what has become one of the dominant arguments of all time: What about the poor? What are we to do with the poor? Jarring! Unsettling! "We're trying to have dinner and you want to bring that up!" Just like the gospel. It's like a family reunion and someone brings up Biden or Trump.

John gives us two models. There's Mary and there's Judas. We know we are supposed to be like Mary: "Sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." Mary anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. We know we are not supposed to be like Judas, but truth be told, sometimes we are Mary; sometimes we are Judas. We struggle with this reality in our dualistic world where you must have a label. You must be liberal or conservative. We are so determined to have two sides to every story, that we allow people to make up a story when there isn't another side. Sometimes there is only one side. In the 1960's and 1970's the tobacco companies managed to create doubt about the science that smoking causes cancer. The media went for it and suddenly we had two sides. But the evidence finally overwhelmed the "merchants of doubt." Sometimes there are not two sides and sometimes there are more than two sides to the same person. But some people are progressive on this issue and conservative on another issue. But that's not how we operate now. We want everything clear cut: one or the other, but I'm saying that sometimes we are Mary and sometimes we are Judas. As a lady once said to me, in a moment of tension and conflict in the church, "Preacher, I am a complex woman."

I miss that kind of thinking. I don't wake up every morning and go down a check list to make sure that all my thoughts, ideas, conclusions, and positions line up perfectly with my side, group, or trial. I'm glad the poor dropped in on the cozy little dinner with Jesus and friends.

When it comes to the poor, some people say Jesus means us as individuals to care for the poor in our neighborhood. Others say it must be social justice for all poor people. Curtis Freeman says that he had a conversation with a priest who believed in social justice. The priest said that he once told Mother Teresa the same thing while they were sharing a breakfast of bananas. Dr. Freeman asked, "What did she do?" He smiled, and said, "She took away my banana."

So, saddle up and understand that I am asking us to look at Judas and Mary. You can keep your banana.

JUDAS REPRESENTS THE PEOPLE WHO SEE WASTE EVERYWHERE

We are smart enough to know that we are not to take the side of Judas. Judas – traitor. Judas – betrayer. Judas – bad. Judas the antagonist in the gospel. He was a thief. I think we have been too hard on Judas. His name suggests an early anti-Semitism in the church: Judas – Jews. The gospel writers make him look as bad as possible as if they knew all along that he would turn out bad. Novelist Reynolds Price wrote a short story about how much Judas loved Jesus. In his story Jesus is confronted with homosexuality because after the resurrection Judas reveals his passionate love for Jesus, a love which foiled, led him, Judas claims, to betray the teacher he had followed so lovingly. Price makes Judas human again since the church has piled it on: Judas the thief, Judas the man who loved money; Judas possessed of Satan; Judas the Zealot attempting to force Jesus to start the revolution. Price says Judas loved Jesus completely and the story fills my heart with a new appreciation for Judas.

But hold on one minute: Sometimes we think Judas was right – the costly perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. How many of us have an eye for waste? I don't think Judas cared about the poor. He wanted to feel good about one act of caring for the poor. That's the heart of the story. Mary's act of sheer generosity and beauty versus Judas suggesting that what we really should do is give the money to the poor. One is generous; the other is selfish. One is loving; the other is self-serving.

Some people really have an eye for what is wasteful, but this time Judas made a mistake, but man o man, Judas appeals to us – the moderately well-to-do. We are just rich enough to believe that we must protect the rich because we hope in our dreams to be rich like them some day. In the USA we even have a mantra for protecting the rich: "Don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs." I think the goose is our national bird rather than the bald eagle. Historian Robert S. McElvaine says, "When profits become too high and taxes on the rich too low, the geese get obese, eventually stop laying eggs, and develop coronary problems."

We are also smart enough to know that Christians are supposed to be on the side of the poor. Being a Christian means caring about those less well off. "Of course, what it means for us – that is, for the moderately well off – to care for the poor usually extends no further than our attempt to make the poor like us, that is, moderately well off" (Hauerwas). Now, we think that money is the answer and that we can solve the issue of poverty by making all poor people reasonably well off.

What if Jesus is not even talking about sharing wealth? What if he is trying to create a new world where the poor are celebrated, have status, standing, worth. Our culture doesn't celebrate the poor. We think being poor indicates that people lack money because they lack sense, ability, initiative. The poor, people think, are lazy. So, we are not a nation that celebrates the poor. You know I'm right about this. We celebrate the wealthy – Forbes list of the wealthiest. We are fascinated by the billionaires. The poor irritate us. Are you familiar with the term "liberal guilt?" As a African American activist once told me, "You white preachers don't care about us; you should like to feel better about pretending to care about us." Ouch! Maybe that's how we are with the poor. We don't care much for the poor, but given the way Jesus teaches, we want to feel good about helping the poor. We are like Governor DeSantis who is trying to enact legislation that makes it illegal to teach anything that makes white people uncomfortable.

Hauerwas says we have forgotten that the church is constituted by the poor. We forget that Jesus was poor. Jesus was born in a barn because there was no room in the inn:

Biblical talk for Joseph didn't have a Master Card. Jesus was homeless: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Jesus owned only the clothes on his back: "when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots" (Matthew 27:35). If Jesus lived here among us, he would be attending our Saturday brunch and using our clothes closet. Jesus was unemployed. No bank account. No retirement plan. No Social Security. No health insurance. No portfolio. Jesus told his followers "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Jesus reverses our usual thinking about the poor and insists that the poor have value. Do we get it now? Value. Jesus himself was poor.

When Jesus said "You always have the poor with you" he was not giving us a get out of responsibility for caring for the poor card. He was telling us that we always have him with us – the poor Son of God. He was rich but for our sake he became poor. How could we have missed it so badly? The poor have value; the poor receive Jesus with acts of sheer beauty and generosity. We, who do everything in our power not to be numbered with the poor, we, who are obsessed with status, standing, and privilege, we missed it didn't we? Jesus was poor. The poor have value. The poor are the church.

MARY REPRESENTS THE POOR WHO ARE BEAUTIFUL AND WORTHY

Mary, however, has seen the new way of life Jesus has offered. She has seen that God's kingdom is one of abundance and not scarcity. She knows there is always enough, because we can't use Jesus up. The world of Jesus is a world of generosity. The new world of Jesus calls poor people rich.

We are smart enough to know that Mary makes us nervous. We mostly believe that there's just no way that Jesus would expect us to give so lavishly as Mary. Mary poured the equivalent of a year's salary on the body of Jesus and then wiped it with her hair. Such intimacy! Such extravagance. You have endured decades of church stewardship programs. Have you ever been moved to sell a farm and give all the money to the church? Give a whole year's salary to the church? Crazy huh?

Jesus says to all Mary's critics, "Leave her alone." Do you see that Jesus is celebrating the poor? He praises Mary; criticizes Judas. This is the exact opposite of our culture. We are not a people who celebrate poverty. In our world, poverty is bad; rich is good. I am not asking you to be poor, I am asking you to be with the poor.

What if we stopped trying to assimilate the poor into the middle class and accepted them and their gifts as our brothers and sisters? We are not very good at relating to the poor. Even when we help homeless people, we are a little jittery. We are sure we want to help but we are not convinced that we want to spend time getting to know the poor. They are not part of our group. They don't come to our church. At FBC Dayton we gave out more than 500 sack lunches a week to the poor. But it was not a relationship. The poor came to the door. A hand reached out with the brown bag to the poor person and the door slammed and locked again. No getting to know a poor person, just an impersonal charity. No doubt this was good work, but it didn't go far enough.

Getting to know the poor is messy work. Ask the church at Corinth. Paul says, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!" By and large, you know that the poor are not here in church with us. They are at the brunch, not in church. Maybe they feel they are not accepted or valued. Maybe they feel unworthy. Maybe they know how we really feel.

Think about it like this. If the rich and poor were in church together, we could learn from one another. The poor could learn not to envy the rich because they are skating on thin ice and the rich could learn not to resent the poor because life is really rough when you are poor.

What I ask of us today is that we resist the appeal of Judas and embrace the act of Mary. God has given lavishly to us. Now, let us give something beautiful to God – the poor as one with us. Only then will the world know what it means to be rich.

Are we prepared to celebrate the poor? Do we believe the poor are the true riches of the church? Do we want to have the poor sitting in the pews with us on Sunday? You may not want to make the decision, but it's on the table now and we have decisions to make.