

**April 7, 2019 Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C**  
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**GOSPEL**

**John 12:1-8**

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the twelfth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Today we hear about a moment in Jesus' ministry  
that was important enough that all four gospel writers tell a version of it.  
Now, they differ on some details...  
but it is clear...this moment mattered immensely  
to those who were witnesses.

A woman did something unforgettably scandalous and extravagant...  
anointing Jesus with expensive oil in public.  
In John, it happens just before Jesus enters into Jerusalem at Passover,  
when he is about to be killed.

It happens that the home of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus,  
who Jesus had just brought back from death.

This meal is a celebration of love and joy and life and reunited family.

Martha has prepared the feast, like she does,  
and Mary is at her Lord's feet...her favorite place to be.

And it is in this context that Mary breaks open a jar of ointment  
that was worth a year's salary and uses it to anoint Jesus's feet,  
drying them with her hair.

The fragrance would have lingered for days...

a reminder of love...but also a foreshadowing of death...

because it was often in death

that people's bodies were lavished with such care

and enfolded in fragrances that tried to stave off the stench of death...

a stench all too familiar to this family...

one that had clung to their brother not long ago.

In a very real way, in doing what she does,

Mary has helped Jesus prepare to enter

the final chapter of his earthly ministry...to go to his own death.

I think we get so drawn in

to the drama of the moment and the tension between Judas and Jesus

at the end, that we can miss the beauty and power of this backdrop.

There is so much love and connection in this place.

This is one of those days when hearts are so full.

Can you imagine what that meal might have been like?

Holding that imagined joy in the back of our minds...

I do want to go to that place that pulls at us and puzzles us, though...

when Judas complains about Mary's extravagance and Jesus responds.

There are three different ways I'd like to try

reading this enigmatic thing Jesus says:

"You always have the poor with you. You do not always have me."

It's entirely possible that one of them is the most technically correct...  
or maybe none of them are...

but I think it's equally likely that all three of them have some truth for us.  
(And for these various readings,  
I'm leaning heavily on commentary by Dr. Lindsey Trozzo  
of Princeton Seminary.)

First, he may mean something like what he appears to say, at face value.

He can be telling us,  
"The work is never going to end.

There will always be someone to take care of...to worry about.

We have to find room for extravagance and celebration and love  
in the midst of struggle and suffering...

If we put off our celebrations and love until all suffering has ended,  
we will never be able to bask in the joy of love and relationship.

We have to find ways to do both...or we won't be able to do either.

Stay in the struggle.

And don't forbid yourself the luxury of love and beauty and joy."

A second way we can hear these words  
comes through knowing that they are a reference  
to the Hebrew Bible book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15.

This is one of those times Jesus quotes Scripture  
without telling us he's doing it,  
so we can miss it if we don't know Scripture as well as he does.

In Deuteronomy 15,

the law speaks of caring for the poor among God's people...

It describes how we should always be generous if we find a neighbor in need.

This part of the law shows poverty to be a source of shame...

not on those who are poor...

but on those who have more than enough and allow poverty to exist.

It is not the poor who should be ashamed of their poverty.

In this way, Jesus might be speaking very directly to Judas,  
who he knew to be a thief who didn't really care for the poor.

When he said,

“You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me,”  
he may have been saying,

“You will always have the poor with you  
because you will never care for them enough  
to make sure they are not poor.

And you will not always have me with you,  
because you are about to walk away from me.”

He may have been subtly telling Judas, publicly,  
that he knows *exactly* who Judas really is...along with everyone like him...

The third way we could hear Jesus' words  
involves a different way of translating them...

It's about some grammar,

and how the indicative and imperative can look the same in Greek.

“You always have the poor with you,”  
might be intended as a statement of fact...

*or it could* be a command:

“Keep the poor with you always.”

Jesus might well be saying...

“You won't always be able to look up and see and touch and hear me  
the way you do now.

But make sure you are always among the poor.

Because that is where you will be closest to what matters.

My church will always be found where the poor and oppressed are found...

Don't only give charity from an insulated distance.

Really be in relationship.

Keep the poor with you.”

What do you think Jesus might really be saying to Judas

and the folks who were there at that feast?  
What might he be saying to us?

First, he says a hearty “yes.” A “yes” to joy, to extravagance, to celebration.

Yes, allow yourself overflowing joy–

even as you remember to care for the poor and to live sacrificially.

You have work to do...but your worth isn't in your work,  
and you deserve to celebrate.

And remember, lest you wonder what burden really belongs to you...

the existence of poverty is to the judgment of the wealthy  
more than the poor...and choosing to allow it

(to the extent that it is in our power)

shames us and distances us from Jesus.

Finally, this call: keep the poor with you...

because when you aren't sure where Jesus is,

that is where you'll find him – sure as anything.

That is where his church will always be, if we are really being who we are.

And very soon now, we will see the lengths he will go,

to gather creation back into one...to reconcile and restore the broken world.

He knows how hard this work is,

and he doesn't leave it to us without making possible

what seems impossible.

He does everything first.

He carves out the Way.

And he is about to set the fullness of his work in motion...

as we continue in the journey of learning and living into what it means for us  
to have a God like this.

Thanks be to God. Amen.