

John 12:1-8  
17 March 2013

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### “Scandal and Spectacle”

How many times have we seen those painful TV commercials showing starving children? I can remember them from as far back as my childhood. These days I find myself cynical...how do I know that child's name is really Ramon? What does the donation actually do to help the community other than just feed children – not that food is not important. Since those spots on TV still go on, it seems even today Jesus' words ring true: “The poor will always be with you.”

From the street children I saw in Honduras, to the families living in agonizing poverty on South Dakota's reservations, to lonely elders in South Carolina, even to our own neighborhoods, I've seen the economic and social inequity that truly is worldwide. Any of us who have gone on mission trips or volunteered locally with PNC or Habitat or helped friends and neighbors, have witnessed the same.

“The poor will always be with you.” Jesus' words can haunt us – especially when other Christians use them to justify extravagant décor in their own sanctuaries or drastic governmental cuts to benefits for the very poor. One woman told the story of growing up in a church that planned to spend millions of dollars on what amounted to rearranging the furniture in their sanctuary. She said, ‘When people questioned spending so much money on cosmetic updates while so many homeless people needed to be fed in our neighborhood, I heard, “The poor will always be with us.”’ Carol Howard Merritt, *The Hardest Question*, March 10, 2013.

Why, then, do so-called people of faith twist these words of Jesus to convince themselves that there is no use trying to work for the greater good of people? How can it be so easy to turn away from the plight of the poor, because some people will just be victims of fateful poverty?

That is the danger of taking biblical words out of context. Even people of faith are fallible when it comes to justifying their own perspectives. In this case they are missing that Jesus spoke those words as part reprimand to Judas and the others, and a message of generous grace. Jesus knew what lay ahead for him, even if the others could not quite see it. In an act of anointing as if for burial, Mary offered Jesus the only thing of value she had. In her selfless extravagance, Mary offered Jesus the same generosity that Jesus had been offering to others throughout his ministry.

There they were, gathered in the house of Lazarus – a man who received an ultimate gift from Jesus – the gift of life. Did Lazarus cringe at the intimate act of Mary washing Jesus' feet with her hair? Did his eyes widen in surprise? I'm guessing we all shrink back from such unconventional and excessive outpourings of faith, love, and service. (David Lose)

When do we rejoice in such a generous outpouring? What is our experience with such occurrences?

On the Cheyenne River Reservation, I remember an evening when the small Green Grass community fed all of us visitors with a potluck. It was not as diverse an offering as we may see even at our own church potlucks, but there were many dishes. They insisted we well-fed folk all go first. Most of us were hesitant to take much because we knew that this may be the best meal our friends would have for the week. But we were instructed ahead of time by our minister that it would be offensive to only take little bits.

This meal was their way of thanking us – never mind they might think we didn't like the food if we didn't fill up our plates! Like Jesus feeding the 5000, all of us ate, including the Indians. People even went back for seconds.

We were uncomfortable with what we thought of as taking from our hosts. In their poverty they gave extravagantly. An outsider might have called it wasteful. But that sort of generosity is only wasteful if the recipient is not touched by it, or if the giver is coerced into the giving. That is the message of grace Jesus conveys today. "The poor will always be with us," is a statement about our human condition. Unless we can share as a grace-filled offering, the poor will be with us. In fact we will be the poorer for it.

May we walk these next days at Jesus' side as he approaches Jerusalem, mindful of the variety of people who have walked the road before us. All those whom Jesus fed, healed, and called. They are with us as well.

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