

## Wesley United Methodist Church

March 13, 2016

“Can’t Win ‘Em All.”

John 12:1-8

Secretly I’m on Judas’ side on this one. You probably don’t want to admit it, but so are you.

He points out that 300 days’ salary had just been cracked open and wasted on Jesus. Well, not wasted. Yeah, wasted. Because once that expensive perfume was used it couldn’t be used again. It was a limited, one time resource. Can you imagine the good that could have been done for the poor? Try to imagine what our church could do if someone donated one year’s worth of salary out of the blue? That’s why I say that many Christians would find themselves on “Judas’ side if they were honest with themselves.

What was Mary thinking? A jar of perfume worth 300 day’s wages? Take away the Sabbath and that’s pretty much a year’s salary. Do you own something worth a year’s salary? What sort of use are you getting out of it? Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, offers a one- time only gift for Jesus. Because once it’s opened you can’t use it anymore.

I don’t know about you, but the longer I own something valuable, the less I want to part with it and the less I get out of it. Do you know people who can’t bring themselves to use the good china? For themselves? Or anyone else? Is there a treasured antique car that never goes out on the road anymore for fear of a scratch or a patch of mud? Is there an outfit you refuse to wear because you’re too sentimental and it has become too valuable?

In our society we have eliminated the sense of smell. We don’t want strong odors. We mask them, we eliminate them. Mary lived in a society that was not afraid of smells. Perfume was handy, especially with the need for quick burial in a warm climate. But then, in most societies people love strong odors. They love thick perfumes. They burn incense. The woman who washed the feet of Jesus knew exactly how much that oil was worth. This extraordinary item was being saved for a day in the future. Probably her own funeral or the funeral of a loved one.

Suddenly the future is now. Mary is the one who sits at the feet of Jesus and listens. She gets it. Unlike the disciples, she knows what lies in store for Jesus. He is going to die. Evidently Mary is the kind of person who buys flowers before a person dies instead of sending them to the funeral home out of guilt. Mary anoints Jesus for his funeral while he is still alive and can enjoy the thick, rich perfume.

In response to those who criticized Mary, Jesus takes time to quote Deuteronomy 15:11, “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.’”

Some people think when the gospel quotes Jesus was saying that we will always have the poor among us that suggests there is no use in trying to work against poverty since we will never solve the problem. But that ignores what Jesus was saying. Sometimes people don’t study their scriptures quite enough. I’ve often heard people quote the words Jesus spoke after his feet were anointed, “You always have the poor with you,” as justification, somehow, of leaving the poor to their lot. They suggest that even Jesus was saying it’s no use trying to keep up. However, those who heard Jesus speak those words knew what he was talking about.

Look at the larger context. In the Deuteronomy passage, Moses was talking about the Year of Jubilee. “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 you land.’” This verse was quoted by Jesus when the woman washed his feet and some criticized her for wasting the gift. Jesus said, in reply, that the poor would always be with us and some have taken that to mean we’ll always have the poor so there’s nothing you can do about it. You can see however that Jesus was quoting the law to say that since we will always have the poor, we must never cease giving. The people who were criticizing the woman for what she did needed to mind their own business and set about helping the poor with their own cash instead of worrying about hers.

That had to make some of the listeners angry... How do you choose who is really in need? We’ve all heard stories about people holding up signs reading “Will work for food” who have been frauds, for instance. Stories

about “Welfare Queens” who grow rich off the system try to deter us from giving. This doesn’t get us off the hook. Nor does quoting Jesus when he said, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” You know that now. Fortunately most Christians, even while practicing some measure of discernment in their stewardship, are more likely to err on the side of charity than sensibility.

If you want to know the truth, sometimes it is the people who have the least who are the most generous. I know people with very little money, limited mobility, and difficult lives, who practice effortless discipleship and limitless charity. For them it’s the most natural thing in the world.

So what is Mary really doing? She is giving Jesus flowers before he dies. Think of the funerals you’ve been to with all the wonderful flowers. Don’t people say, as they ooh and ah, “Oh, she would have loved them.” Wouldn’t it have been nicer to give the flowers before death?

Mary used the funeral perfume, worth 300 day’s pay, and uses it on Jesus. This is her final gift to her Lord. She is not saving the good stuff. She is getting out the good china, the good silverware. Her home is not a museum and neither should ours be one. In effect Mary tells Jesus she knows he must die and the comfort begins now. She is present.

Are we present with the dying? Yes we are. We are all dying. Living is dying. We need to comfort each other and bring hope.

To think about this story, things are worse than they seem. Mary breaks all sorts of barriers in the society and shocks people when she ministers to Jesus. There are social, cultural, and religious taboos that separate them—but Jesus reaches across all barriers to touch our lives, and we are called to take some risks to share the gospel with those who are suffering and those who are lost.

There is no pleasing some people. Yes, she should have giving that money to the poor. It’s an argument that makes sense. But, instead of worrying about what other people are doing with their money, we ought to look in our own wallets and purses and give to the poor as we see fit. Don’t look to others to do something.

They don’t like anything that Mary has done here—touched Jesus, wept on his feet, spent her money. It’s all about her money. Mary is using the good china. She is living the resurrection.

You will know Jesus Christ in the poor. You will know Jesus Christ in your giving. You will know Jesus Christ in your relationships. You must have Jesus Christ at the center. It is what makes all other things possible and gives them meaning.

Remember as you go about the business of the Lord, there is no pleasing some people. Trust me, we can always find something wrong with everything. Jesus is quoting from a Deuteronomy text that makes it clear that rather than criticize others, we ought to get busy ourselves. We ought to pick up our own crosses and follow... The party starts now. It’s time for the big show. And the road continues past palms to crosses and beyond to glory. Amen.