

April 7, 2019 – 5th Sunday in Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 12:1-8

Charity and Love

Someone asked me the other day, “Why is there a recycling bin in the narthex with the name Judas on it?” A fair question. The bin has to do with the Sunday School theme this year, which is: “Who cares for God’s creation?” To reinforce this environmental theme, in various locations throughout the church the Confirmation students placed a number of recycling bins, that number being twelve. Being twelve bins, they got twelve names, of the twelve disciples—caring for creation is an act of discipleship. For whatever reason, a very visible bin, one in a high traffic area, happened to be the one with the name Judas on it. Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Judas, the disciple who for a few coins handed the Christ over to torture and death. We’ve got Judas’s name on a recycling bin where everyone can see it.

Judas also appears in today’s gospel story, and his presence here might make us as uneasy as his name in the narthex—but in a different way. It’s a worrisome thing when you read the gospel and the person with whom you most identify is Judas. That’s how I feel when I read today’s story, I identify with Judas—with his question, which, I think, is not unreasonable.

The question happens in the context of a dinner party. Jesus is there with various friends, and then one of them, Mary of Bethany, does a rather startling thing, a behavior beyond reason. She takes a large quantity of very, very expensive perfume, and she uses all of it to anoint Jesus’ feet—not just with a dab, she uses all of it, something that cost a year’s wages. The ointment seeps between Jesus’ toes and runs off onto the floor. The house is filled with the fragrance of perfume, it permeates the room. Judas sees how what had been an asset just evaporated, and he wonders. There are people who are starving, and we’re intentionally spilling wealth? Is this a wise use of resources? It’s a fair question, a pragmatic question, with an eye for the poor. Prudence and benevolence are both Christian values, but the one espousing them here is Judas, the one who would betray Jesus, as we’re reminded, pointedly, in a parenthetical note. Yet another set of parentheses explains that Judas asked his question, not because he was concerned for the poor, but because he kept the common purse and helped himself to it. He was a thief, the story says, as if to alleviate our discomfort. He wasn’t really charitable, or thrifty; he wasn’t a pennypincher, he was a penny pincher.

Whether Judas was stealing or not, it’s still a fair question. Couldn’t the value of the perfume been used for the poor? Any discomfort we might feel wondering this very reasonable reflection, which puts us in company with Judas, any unease we have about this is only intensified by what Jesus says in response: “Let her alone. Let her spend it on me, now. You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” What?! We might be excused for thinking the Son of God shows here a strange combination of self-centeredness and indifference to the destitute. “Pay attention to him, the poor aren’t going anywhere.”

We might also counter both charges, in numerous ways.

Is Jesus being selfish, having his feet anointed and tenderly wiped? No, Jesus is not being selfish by allowing someone to care for him—the very opposite. As anyone who has been the recipient of care knows, it is not easy to receive it. It requires you to give up some of your “self,” that others may take care of you. It is often an act of selfishness not to accept care. Moreover, in what Jesus does, allowing another to do something for him, he points out the

presence and action of another self: Jesus speaks up about, defends, a person whom others have ignored or disparaged, historically, and still today: a woman—a woman who has the audacity to express herself, even in extravagant ways. Jesus stands in solidarity with her, and with what she does, which is sacred, he says. She sees something that others do not. Jesus' response also says something about the passing of judgement on other's people's self-expressions, what's emotionally permissible, especially in how one worships. Jesus firmly dismisses attempts to control and contain what devotion looks like. Jesus says, "Do not tell others their spiritual expressions are inappropriate."

To the second charge, is Jesus unconcerned with the poor? Hardly. In all that he has been preaching and teaching and the multitudes he has been feeding and healing, Jesus stands in a long line of advocacy and action for the disenfranchised, all inspired by religious conviction. Jesus is very Jewish in this. The call to care for the poor courses through the Hebrew Bible, is commanded in the law and demanded by the prophets. You cannot worship the God of Israel and miss this. Concern for the poor is ubiquitous, as are the poor. There will always be the poor, and we must always care for them. Sometimes, we are them. Jesus was. God came to earth as one of the lowly. Jesus said that when we care for the poor, we care for him; when we do it to the least of these, we do it to him. And Jesus cared for the poor, and blessed them, spoke beatitudes about them, broke bread with and for them, commended their offerings, their "mites," which are generous beyond reason. It's not insignificant to note, too, that when Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you..." in the original language of the text, the tense of that phrase could either be in the indicative, or the imperative. That is, it could either be a statement, "You always have the poor," or an admonition: "Be always with the poor," or both.

The greatest challenge of this story, though, does not have to do with intricacies of grammar, or financial impropriety, or sensory overload. The greatest challenge and charge of this story, the great discomfort of the gospel, is this: You cannot love God in the abstract. You cannot propose good deeds, but be perturbed by displays of affection. You cannot follow an extravagantly generous God, but be abstemious in your fondness for others. You cannot serve a concept, "the poor" but not a person, the one whose feet are tired, dirty, even smelly. Loving the idea of right behavior but not the person right next to you is nothing less than a betrayal of the God we know in Jesus, a betrayal that we all do, in very visible ways, where all can see it.

The words charity and love are often used to mean different things: the former a gift for someone less fortunate, the latter the stirrings of the heart. Charity and love are different words in English, but there is no distinction between the two in the Bible, in what it means to be a disciple. Charity and love cannot be separated, and where they are, Christ is, always.