

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 3, 2022

Meeting Needs

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“You always have the poor with you...” (John 12:8a, NRSV). These words of Christ have been much debated and, at times, ill-used by theologians and the church universal. It almost sounds hopeless, right? There will always be poor people. That’s a pretty pessimistic assessment; I, for one, dream of a world where poverty no longer exists. I dream of a society where every person’s needs are met. And I would hope you would have similar dreams!

So what is going on here? Why does Jesus make this statement? As can often be the case in the words of Jesus, this statement may be a reference to the Torah. We certainly experience how well versed Jesus is in the Law numerous times in John’s Gospel.¹ So let me read you a verse from Deuteronomy 15 that may be what Jesus is referencing. Deuteronomy 15 is laying out the rules regarding a “year of jubilee” every seven years in which debts are cancelled and slaves are freed. After outlining the process for this special year (a process which we have no evidence of ever being followed), Moses relates these words from Yahweh, “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land” (Deut. 15:11, NRSV).

Oh! That reference may change how we hear these words of Christ. Rather than hearing them as hopeless, that the plight of the poor will never be remedied. Perhaps this is an invitation to focus on the poor right in front of the disciples’ eyes. Especially since the poor person in front of them, unlike the poor in general, will **not** be with them always. Yes, I am calling Jesus poor.

Now, I don’t mean that Jesus was poor in terms of material means, though that would not surprise me. We do not hear much about Jesus’ possessions in scripture. There are all of two possible references to Jesus having a home (one in Mark 2 and one in John 1), but that’s about it. When it comes to other

¹ (cf John 1:1-18; John 8:12-13, 17-18; John 10:34-36; John 13:18; John 15:25)

material possessions...there's not much mentioned. As a matter of fact, there is a fair amount of evidence to suggest that Jesus was materially poor. Why else would Luke mention this in reference to several of his female disciples: "they provided financial support for Jesus and his disciples" (Luke 8:3c, NRSV)?

That being said, I don't believe that it is material poverty that is being addressed by Mary in our text for today. After all, there are other kinds of poverty. Which begs the question, what is poverty? That can be a difficult question to answer, but I would argue that, fundamentally, poverty is an experience of lacking some basic necessity.

So, is Jesus poor? Materially? Perhaps. But in this scene from John 12, is Jesus poor? I would argue yes, but his poverty is not material. I believe his poverty is spiritual. What is the basic need that is not being met for Jesus here in John 12? Understanding and compassion.

Think about his situation. It is six days before the Passover, the Passover that Jesus knew would mark his execution. Jesus is staying in Bethany, which is essentially a suburb of Jerusalem, where he will be abandoned and die. He is on the verge of drinking the cup that he would rather not drink. And who is his support network in the midst of all of this distress and anxiety? Clueless disciples who will abandon him when the going gets tough.

By this time in John's Gospel Jesus has told the disciples, three different times, that he will die: John 2:13-22; John 3:13-21; John 10:7-8. And what's the reaction from the disciples? Complete misunderstanding! In John 2 we read that the disciples will not understand what Jesus meant about rebuilding the Temple (of his body) until after his death and resurrection. Nicodemus will miss the point completely of Jesus' needing to be lifted up to save others like Moses' snake on a stick. His prediction in John 10 is met with derision by the crowds, some even calling him a raving lunatic.

There's not much understanding here, is there? Not much compassion either! We will watch these disciples, Jesus' supposed support network, as they repeatedly let Jesus down during his arrest, trial, torture, and execution. By their words and actions prior to this point we know that, like Nicodemus, the other disciples are trapped by their expectations of the Messiah which lead them to misunderstanding and indifference.

So yes, I believe Jesus was quite poor when Mary entered the room of that house in Bethany and saw something in Jesus that clued her in to his needs. I suspect she ran out of the room to go find something to try to help him as his time of trial began. I imagine her rushing to the marketplace and casting about for something that might express her love and concern for Jesus. She may not fully understand what's going on, but she clearly sees some need in Jesus.

Who knows how she arrives at nard for a gift. Perhaps it was the movement of the Holy Spirit. But in the scene I'm crafting in my imagination I see her moving through various stalls until the scent of perfume wafts by. She moves closer to the source of the scent and starts to look through the various jars and vials. Perhaps again guided by the Spirit, she sees the nard and something triggers in her mind. Maybe she remembers one or two of those passion predictions she's heard from Jesus. Or perhaps she is thinking about the spices she purchased recently for her dear brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead not that long ago. Whatever the reason, she grabs the bottle and approaches the vendor.

300 denarii?? That's a lot of money! One denarius was considered a day's wage for the typical laborer. Three hundred denarii then, represents almost a full year's worth of time and energy expended. I wonder if the price caught Mary off guard, or if she hesitated at all. It's a lot of money after all! But perhaps Mary's thoughts turned instead to the teachings of Christ. The repeated messages about the abundance of God's love and grace. Or maybe she thought back to the time by the Sea of Galilee when Jesus took "five small barley loaves and two small fish" (John 6:9a) and provided more than enough to feed five thousand men, plus the thousands of women and children that were gathered there too. In the face of such generosity it's hard not to respond in kind!

I picture Mary emptying her purse out into the vendor's hands and rushing back to where Jesus and the others were gathered. She throws open the door and hurries to the feet of Christ where she uncorks the jar, letting the odor fill the room, and thus identifying the perfume as the pricey burial spice, nard. She pours the costly ointment over her Rabbi's feet then realizes that in her rush she didn't grab a towel to work the perfume into his skin. So, without hesitation or even a second thought, she uncovers her hair and draws it down to his feet and in act of intimate love, works the burial oil into his skin.

Mary saw the poverty of compassion and understanding that Jesus was experiencing. She saw something in Jesus that spoke to her of what he needed most, and she responded to it. She met the needs of Jesus; he lacked love and support for what he was about to endure, and she somehow saw that poverty. And, being a better disciple than most, she sought to meet the need of that poverty. She saw need and worked to meet it. There is no quicker summation of discipleship than that.

I believe that is why Jesus references Deuteronomy 15 and adds on that bit about the disciples not always having him. I don't believe Jesus is trying to teach us to not prioritize the needs of the poor; rather he is teaching the disciples to respond to the needs that are right in front of them. He wants them, and us too, to open our eyes to different sorts of poverty and need that exist right around us. And, seeing the needs of those around us, Christ wants us to follow Mary's example and serve those needs!

In a world full of brokenness and poverty we can become blind to the needs of those around us. The amount of work ahead of us can feel overwhelming too. But the plain truth of the matter is that Jesus is trying to get us to see that unmet needs are everywhere and we are called to be generous or openhanded, in meeting those needs. We can't change the world, but we can change our little corner of it. And that change seems to come first through truly seeing the people around us; seeing their needs and trying to meet them. That is the Way of Christ. That is the way of love. May we follow Mary's example in walking it! Amen.