

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifth Sunday in Lent - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

04/07/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary 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. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶(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.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Costly

Good morning! When I was in undergraduate school at Wheeling Jesuit University I took a class on Judaism that was taught by the Jewish biology professor. He had a favorite saying that would routinely be used throughout the class: “If you have ten Jews in a room, you’ll have 11 opinions.” I think the same could be said about Christians, and nowhere else is this more evident than when a group of church goers needs to decide what to do with some money. It’s interesting that a text on waste and appropriate spending comes on the Sunday that we decide how to give away \$10,000. One commentator writes *“What church serious about discipleship does not struggle with the tension between money spent in beautiful acts of worship and money spent on behalf of the poor?”*¹ William G. Carter shares this story, writing the following: *“I will never forget the furor sparked at a stewardship conference at which an ecumenical group of pastors gathered to discuss generosity. One presenter spoke about offering a gift directly to God, and the clergy began to yawn. Then he pulled out a \$100 bill from his wallet, set it on fire in an ashtray, and prayed ‘Lord, I offer this to you, and you alone.’ The reaction was electric. Clergy began to fidget in their chairs, watching that greenback go up in smoke as if it were perfume. One whispered it was illegal to burn currency. Another was heart to murmur, ‘if he is giving money away, perhaps he has a few more.’ There was nervous laughter around the room. ‘Do you not understand?’*

¹ 145 feasting on the word

*asked the speaker. 'I am offering it to God, and that means it is going to cease to be useful for the rest of us.' It was an anxious moment."*²

Wow! Talk about a powerful example! As I was thinking about where this sermon should go I kept coming back to one interesting detail. In today's story it's Judas who is arguing that the money was wasted. You could hear this same conversation in any church finance meeting across the United States with faithful leaders arguing that the money should be spent frugally and yet, that's not what Jesus argues for in today's text. huh...

What do you make of that? It's certainly something to think about. But Jesus isn't advocating for the misuse of wealth. We often hear verse 7 used as a defense for careless spending. Jesus is actually quoting a text from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 15:11 we hear the following: *"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."* So if you ever hear someone use the old "we'll always have the poor with us" argument, be sure to throw Deuteronomy back at them.

But that doesn't really help us figure out what to do with the text. Should we be giving away all our money or should we be buying expensive art?! Well, for once in my life I don't know if I have an answer, so you're going to decide. It's time for everyone's favorite game, speak to your neighbor! We're going to take a few minutes to let everyone talk about the text and then we'll come back for a closing thought. The over-arching question is this: Where do you stand? Give it all way? Spend it some other way?

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Short break as the congregation discusses the text.

Ok! Come back now. What did you decide? Here's what I think. Sometimes, we won't get an answer from the text. Life is complicated, and the writers of the Bible knew that too. So when it comes to a text like this sometimes the best thing to do is to just sit back and enjoy the Word of God. I've always found this story to be a deeply powerful one. And maybe it's precisely because it leaves us asking questions! Sometimes God hits us with something so good all we can really do is just sit back and admire the unique way that God is at work. This story isn't about us, it's not about the poor either, it's about our God. It's about Jesus being anointed for his death on his way to the cross. So, listen again: *1Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary 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. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6(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.) 7Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Amen.*