

## EXTRAVAGANT POVERTY

JOHN 12: 1-8

The Fifth Sunday in Lent – March 21, 2010

University Church of Chicago – Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

In seventeenth century England there lived a country parson named Samuel Crossman. A reluctant Anglican of Puritan outlook, he spent most of his ministry in a small Gloucestershire parish whose chief hamlet is delightfully named Easter Compton. Crossman wrote a handful of devotional poems, one of which, in a most unusual meter, is a work of genius. Beginning “My song is Love unknown,” it ends the story of Jesus’ arrest, trial, death and burial with an exclamation of quiet joy that contrasts the suffering that had shaped the life of Father Crossman in his little English parsonage:

Here might I stay and sing,

No story so divine;

Never was love, dear King!

Never was grief like Thine.

This is my Friend,

In Whose sweet praise

I all my days

Could gladly spend. ( #56, *The Anglican Hymnal*)

“The intimacy of Crossman’s lines,” writes Diarmaid MacCulloch in his new history of *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*,” hints at the degree to which Christianity is, at root, a personality cult. Its central message is the story of a person, Jesus, whom Christians believe is also the Christ (from a Greek word meaning ‘Anointed One’): an aspect of the God who was, is and ever shall be, yet who is at the same time a human being, set in historic time.”

We who are named Christians believe that we can still meet this human being in a fashion comparable to the experience of the disciples who walked with him in Galilee and saw him die on the Cross. Further, we believe that this meeting transforms lives, as has been evident in the experience of other Christians across the centuries.

Today’s story in John 12 confronts us with one of those moments in the ministry of Jesus that changes our experience of Him. On the surface it sounds like other anointing stories in the Gospels. One of them raises moral issues about the woman, probably a prostitute, certainly an adulteress who anoints Him (Luke 7:36-49), while another reminds us that we must always show kindness to the poor (Mark 14: 3-8).

But this story is different. As Mary anoints Jesus with costly perfume, Judas objects: “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” When you think about this incident, that is a legitimate question—although the writer of the Fourth Gospel cuts Judas no slack, calls him a hypocrite and thief who really doesn’t care about the poor but kept the common purse of the Twelve and “used to steal what was put into it” (v.6).

William Carter tells of the furor sparked at a stewardship conference at which a group of pastors gathered to discuss generosity. One presenter spoke about offering a gift directly to God, and you could just see the pastors’ eyes glaze over. Then he pulled from his wallet a one hundred dollar bill, set it on fire in an ashtray, and prayed, “Lord, I offer this gift to you and to you alone.”

The reaction was electric, says Carter. The pastors began to fidget in their seats as they watched that greenback go up in smoke, as if it were perfume. One whispered it was illegal to burn currency. Another was heard 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?” 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, to say the least, an anxious moment.

Judas speaks for us when he raises the utilitarian question about the perfume that Mary lavishes on Jesus’ feet.

And there’s the question of Judas’s hypocrisy. Whenever I am confronted by one of those cynical, used-to-be church members who says, “I used to go to church but I don’t go any more. The church is filled with hypocrites,” I reply, “Come on back. We can always use one more hypocrite.” Because, you see, we are all hypocrites. Every one of us pretends to be something we are not; every one of us wears a mask to hide our real self, to protect ourselves from the slings and arrows of the world.

If America has a comic genius, it is Mel Brooks. My kids were raised on the “Two Thousand Year Old Man” spontaneous, unrehearsed dialogues between Brooks and Carl Reiner, and I think “Blazing Saddles” is one of the funniest movies ever made. And who can forget “The Producers,” one of the longest-running musicals on Broadway and in Chicago, where it had its beginning?

Brooks points up our universal hypocrisy in his cinematic spoof on Robin Hood, “Men in Tights.” One of the more subtle pieces of comedy revolves around Prince John, played by Richard Lewis. The Prince is seeking to steal the throne from his cousin King Richard who is away fighting the Crusades. The Prince is not just greedy and conniving; he is also cowardly, bumbling, indecisive. The way that Brooks depicts this aspect of John’s character is by placing a rather large mole over the left side of his lip. Later the mole appears on the other side of his lip. Later it moves to his right cheek, then to his left cheek, eventually back to where it started.

The moveable mole is a reminder that this character is a farce. He is not genuine, and neither is his mole. The Prince’s character is so malleable that his facial features change from moment to moment. This is the classic meaning of the Greek word which is translated “hypocrite” in the Bible. The word

connoted those stage performers who played a part. That's what Prince John was doing in Mel Brooks's movie: playing a part. His moveable mole reminded us that he was not really who he was pretending to be.

Judas is one of us. Just because we are followers of Christ does not mean that we are pure and blameless—especially when it come to things monetary. We envy the rich, and if we are rich, we envy those who are richer. "Poverty is an abstraction even for the poor," writes Tony Judt in his new book, *Ill Fares the Land*. But the symptoms of collective impoverishment are all about us. Broken highways, bankrupt cities, collapsing bridges, failed schools, the unemployed, the underpaid, and the uninsured: all suggest a collective failure of will."

We no longer know how to talk about what is wrong, much less about how to repair it. Something is seriously amiss in the United States of America. We budget tens of millions of dollars on a futile military campaign in Afghanistan in addition to the trillions of dollars that the Bush Administration never budgeted for Iraq and Afghanistan and yet we fret about higher taxes and any increase of public spending on social services or infrastructure. We are indeed political as well as personal hypocrites.

And then there is Mary. Martha, the older sister, the organizer, the one who frets and worries and prepares the table and makes sure everything is in place has invited the guests to celebrate the fact that Lazarus, their brother and the friend of Jesus, has been raised from the dead. "There they gave a dinner for him, and Martha served," John tells us (v.2). Mary takes a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard and anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. With her hair! An act of devotion as well as an act of licentiousness in first-century Palestine. Nice women did not do such things! And "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (v. 3).

This abundance of blessing and extravagance occurs throughout the Fourth Gospel. At the wedding feast in Cana, 180 gallons of new wine are created—even more than a wedding crowd can consume. Five thousand hungry people are fed by the Sea of Galilee, with twelve baskets of leftovers remaining. After fishing all night without results, Simon Peter is instructed by the risen Christ to cast his net on the other side of the boat, and immediately 153 large fish begin jumping into the net.

As John states in the beginning of his Gospel, everything that was made was made through the Christ. There is abundance wherever Christ is present. As Mary generously anoints him, he tells her critics to "leave her alone" (v.7). Because Jesus knows what His Church always struggles with: we are too practical, useful, cost effective. 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? Yet, our hearts are diminished if the church budget is our first concern. God does not command us to be spendthrifts, but God is constantly reminding us that before a gift can be wasted, it must first be received.

Mary's anointing anticipates Jesus' washing the feet of the Twelve on his last night, and Jesus then compares his impending death with the plight of the poor: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (v. 8). Incredibly, this statement has been interpreted to imply that nothing

should be done for the poor. Truth is: Jesus' saying comes from Deuteronomy 15:11, which enjoins Israel to "open your hand to the poor, because there will never cease to be some in need."

In his middle age, Thomas Merton began to experience what most people deal with at that stage of life: illness, decline of energy, doctors and nurses and hospitals. He had to leave his hermitage in his beloved monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky to go for physicians appointments. But one day he had what James Joyce called "an epiphanal experience":

In Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs. It was like waking from a dream of separateness to take your place as a member of the human race. I had the immense joy of being [human], a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. If only everybody could realize this, but it cannot be explained, there is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun."

We misunderstand, says Merton, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. "We tend to think that nothing in a person's ordinary life is really supernatural except saying prayers or performing pious acts of one sort or another." When we separate the sacred and the secular, the flesh and the spirit, the moral and the monetary, we get ourselves into league with Judas in this story.

I dare you to stand at the corner of 57<sup>th</sup> and University tomorrow or the corner of Washington and Clark or Sixty-third and Woodlawn and see those faces shining like the sun as your brothers and sisters. John Calvin said that God comes to us in three particular ways: In Scripture, as the Word of God, revealing God's love and God's loving relationship with humanity; in the Sacraments, in Baptism and Holy Communion; and ultimately in the incarnate Christ, in God taking on human flesh, becoming like us.

Fred Craddock tells of reading Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus* when he was about twenty years old. "I found his Christology woefully lacking—more water than wine. I marked it up, wrote in the margins, raised questions of all kinds." Then one day he read in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* that Albert Schweitzer was going to be in Cleveland, Ohio, to play the dedicatory concern for a big organ in a big church. According to the article he would remain afterward in the fellowship hall for conversation and refreshment.

So Fred bought a Greyhound bus ticket and went to Cleveland. All the way up there he worked on his copy of *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. He laid out his questions of a sheet of paper and made references to the pages he disputed in Schweitzer's book. He figured that there would be time enough in the fellowship hall for him to challenge the great theologian/historian/medical doctor/biblical scholar, writer/master organist.

After hearing the concert, Fred rushed into the fellowship hall, got a seat in the front row and waited with his lap of questions. After a while Schweitzer came in, shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, seventy-five years old. He had played a marvelous concert. He came in with a cup of tea and some refreshments and stood in front of the group. He thanked everybody: "You have been very warm, hospital to me. I thank you for it, and I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to

Africa. I must go back to Africa because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying, and I have to go. We have a medical station at Lambarene. If there is anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help me?"

Fred looked down at his questions. They were so absolutely stupid. "And I learned again what it means to be Christian."