**SERMON John 12:1-8 (Good Enough 5)**

INTRODUCTION

You will always have the poor among you.

As the “Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice” puts it: “We are experiencing unprecedented poverty in the midst of plenty; unnecessary abandonment in spite of unheard abundance.”

You will always have the poor among you.

Today, in the United States, one of the richest nations in the world, nearly half the population is either poor or a single $400 emergency away from poverty. The moral and cognitive dissonance of such a reality can be difficult to fathom, as can the numbers.

You will always have the poor among you.

The top 1% of the population own almost half of the nation’s wealth;

the top 5% own 75% of wealth and

the bottom 80% are left with less than 10% of wealth.

At the same time, racial and gender inequality remains as deep as ever.

You will always have the poor among you.

LINK PASSAGE TO THEME

Inequality is a formidable foe, especially when we recognize that we are fighting an entire network of systems (a reality that Pastor Lori drew attention to last week) — as well as we are fighting the deep-set values that constructed the problem and continue to contribute to them. It can easily feel hopeless, easy to feel like, “what difference can my contributions actually make?” It’s like a drop in the ocean.

*The poor will, indeed, always be among us.*

But, in this passage. We encounter Jesus as he was transitioning from his ministry of storytelling and healing to a different kind of ministry, as he made his way to Jerusalem. The ‘Godly Play’ curriculum for the children and youth last week, said that Jesus moved from telling parables, to becoming a parable himself. A beautiful way of understanding Jesus’ last days on earth.

And so, in the midst of this transition and all the uncertainty ahead, Jesus and his beloved friends gather around the table to feast together. The public ministry has been, in some sense a failure. His own people, especially their religious leaders, to whom he and his disciples has preached truth, light and life, had largely rejected him. However, those who did believe, were gathering to form a loving community that sought to live a different way. A way that paid attention to the hurting, the lonely, the sick and the poor.

And in this scene, we see Jesus accepting the simple meal Martha served him, as well as Mary’s extravagant act of devotion. Jesus’ defense of Mary’s actions models for us another way to approach poverty, and indeed to one another.

STORY

During the pandemic, one of my most dearly held beliefs got turned around, and I can never go back. I think it was my grandfather who first told me that if a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well. He was a preacher and a farmer, and I figured he probably knew best. And it was a message my parents reiterated again and again. So, I took it to heart. AND THEN SOME. I told myself that everything worth doing was worth doing well. Not just well, but as near perfect as possible. For a long time, I never wanted to half-ass anything. If I was going to do something, you could bet I was putting my whole self into it. Sport, education, work: All these things needed to be done pretty much perfectly, because why do anything important poorly?

Then a worldwide pandemic hit, a lack of control seeped through every aspect of life, and mental health suffered, for me, and almost everyone I know. Routines were shattered. Everyday life became more challenging. Perfection seemed pointless. And an interesting thought occurred to me (although it occurred to 20th-century author G. K. Chesterton first). Doing important, worthwhile things, at any level, is better than not doing them at all. Something is truly better than nothing. Chesterton said, ‘if something is worth doing, it is worth doing badly,’ do you know that saying? I realized that in the vast majority of cases and circumstances, if a thing is worth doing, it really is worth doing poorly.

If you can’t do 10,000 steps today, do 1000. If you can’t write 2000 words, write 200. If you can’t declutter this whole room, just do this drawer. If you can’t brush your teeth for 2 minutes, do it for 30 seconds. If you can’t plan fun, exciting, quality time with your kids or your spouse, lie on the sofa and watch a movie with them.

Along the way I discovered something I’d kind of forgotten about. I believe it’s called *middle ground*. There’s an alternative to being a perfectionist, that’s not being a total failure. There’s quite a lot of middle ground, it turns out, where things can be ‘*just good enough*’, or ‘not great, but done’. And the world doesn’t stop spinning when you decide to occupy that middle ground for a while.

LINK

And this idea of ‘doing something, even if is not perfect’ brings me back to our passage today. Did you notice the exact words of Jesus’ rebuke to Judas. Verse 7: “Leave her alone. This perfume *was to be used* in preparation for my burial, and *this* is how she used it.” Mary’s extraordinary amount of expensive perfume, pure nard, wasn’t even intended for this purpose. She had purchased it for the rite of burial. *That* would have been the appropriate, the planned out, sensible and perfect way to utilize such special perfume. And yet, almost on impulse Mary is compelled to forgo the thing she was planning to do, and instead did *something*. It was imperfect perhaps, messy, and unplanned. But she did something, and at the risk of looking foolish and drawing criticism…which of course she did.

And Jesus’ acceptance of this impulsive, honest-to-god act of devotion, this outpouring of authentic love and generosity, is telling. I think it’s clear that this anointing wasn’t perfect…but Jesus models an approach that is based not in fear but in hope. It is based on an abundance-mindset, not a scarcity-mindset. It is based on the hope for a future yet to come. It is based on the knowledge that we humans are not perfect and therefore our actions will never be perfect. But, if something is worth doing, it is worth doing, PERIOD. And even if it is done poorly, if it is done with love and generosity, it can be good enough, and it is certainly better than nothing.

INTRO TO THE MAIN POINTS

So, what does it mean to fight against poverty, when we face the pervasive reality that the poor will always be among us. I for one have heard this phrase used to justify apathy or inaction in the face of poverty or to criticize movements that work for systemic change. If Jesus says, “You will always have the poor among you, b*ut you won’t always have me*,” — so the argument goes — we should attend to spiritual needs over, above, or instead of tangible needs. “Just a closer walk with Thee” instead of a march on Washington; thoughts and prayers as opposed to votes and legislation. But this interpretation presents significant problems. I’m going to focus on a couple this morning that Princeton Theologian and Pastor, Lindsey Jodrey drew to my attention this week.

FIRST POINT**: WE CAN’T SEPARATE JESUS FROM THE POOR.**

We have got to take the big-picture view of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus brought good news in tangible ways to the oppressed and vulnerable. The truth of who Jesus was is bound up with the theological reality that he challenged oppressive political and social systems. His actions and words consistently challenged the oppressive political system of his day. Right after this story in John, Jesus rides into Jerusalem as a new kind of king (12:12-19). *Although* the Empire promised peace and prosperity, *it did so* through systems that polarized the distribution of wealth, padding the pockets of the elite and leaving the majority impoverished. Sound familiar?

Jesus resisted these systems to the extent that he was executed as a rival of Caesar and an enemy of the Roman Empire (John 19:12). To focus on Jesus is to focus on the poor; to work for the kind of kingdom that Jesus established is to challenge systems of oppression and to always side with the vulnerable. Jesus’ defense of Mary’s act of devotion doesn’t change that.

SECOND POINT: **WE MAY BE READING THIS WRONG.**

There’s a funny thing in ancient Greek grammar, and I won’t bore you will all the details, but sometimes statements of facts look the same as commands. So it would be perfectly legitimate to read Jesus’ words not simply as a statement or indication of the way things are, but as a command. So You will always have the poor with you, could just as easily be translated Always have or Always keep the poor with you*.*

With this in mind, let’s return to the story. The disciples and some close friends of Jesus are eating dinner. And Mary brings in a pound of expensive perfume. She pours this perfume on Jesus’ feet and his head. This is an anointing scene. Two big events in ancient Palestine would call for an anointing like this: a coronation and a burial. This scene shows that Jesus is a king, and it shows that he is about to die. He will be leaving soon. Even though he is leaving, his mission remains in the hands of those who follow him. “I am going away,” Jesus says, but the poor are always with you. Always have the poor among you.

Perhaps this statement, which has been used to justify disregard for the poor is actually a direct command to always have Jesus’ mission for and among the poor at the forefront of our thoughts and actions. Always have the poor among you. As in DO NOT FORGET THE POOR. Have them on your heart. Keep them in your mind. Make decisions by considering their needs.

CONCLUSION

You will always have the poor among you.

Jesus’ words about the poor here echo Deuteronomy 15:11: “there will never cease to be some in need on the earth.” The context of Deuteronomy 15 reads: “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.’” Deuteronomy 15 outlines the practice of a Sabbatical year in Israel’s tradition. Every seventh year, the people of Israel were instructed to forgive all debts. In light of the fact that they were also instructed to give generously in the years leading up to the Sabbatical year, this was an outrageous occurrence.

Every 50th year, after four Sabbatical cycles, they’d have a year of Jubilee — which had even greater generosity and debt forgiveness involving ownership of land and release for the enslaved. This context reminds us not to take Jesus’ words about the poor as a reality to be accepted but as a charge to hold up a different value system despite the failings of the system we are in. It reminds us to work toward systematic change in revolutionary ways.

You will always have the poor among you.

Our mission is to cultivate tender endurance in this journey of faith and our engagement with issues of injustice, even when it may look or feel like failure. Doing something imperfectly is better than doing nothing.

Always have the poor among you.