

ON LOVE AND JUSTICE

Sermon preached by Sarah Segal McCaslin, MDiv

March 25, 2007

John 12:1-8

Our text this morning from the Gospel of John finds us nearing the end of the Lenten season. Our journey is nearing its completion, all the signs are pointing towards that rough and splintered cross. The sights and sounds and smells of this text remind us all too clearly of what is about to take place. As John begins this chapter- only six days from the Passover, and in Bethany, a short distance from Jerusalem, Jesus stops to share an intimate moment with a faithful disciple, a charged moment with a deceitful disciple, and a shared meal at the table with his closest companions. This is not yet the Last Supper, nor yet Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, nor even Judas' betrayal of Jesus to the authorities. We are not quite there, though the Gospel writer clearly seeks to make known how preciously close we are to the end. It has the effect of making each action and word that much more poignant, that much more weighted with the truth that is bearing down, unavoidable. We hear this story and simultaneously flash backwards and forwards in time to the reflective images that John presents to the reader. It is enough to raise the hairs on our arms and say, "So soon?"

But not just yet. Instead, we pause here, just outside Jerusalem, just before the high holy days of Judaism, and we spend a little more time with God on earth with us. And we encounter Jesus in the house of some of his closest friends: Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, and Mary and Martha, those faithful women, disciples indeed, who, though missing from the ranks of the named apostles, oftentimes seem to be the only ones who really get it. The only ones who really get Jesus. Who don't need the message repeated again and again. And of course, Judas. Who can forget Judas? The traitor and thief, beleaguered disciple, the enemy and yet one for whom we cannot help but sympathize, recognizing in him so many things that we see in ourselves. Like the desire for self-preservation, or the desire sometimes to escape the ambiguities of faith for the simple obedience to perceived authority.

We enter the house, a house filled with the smells of dinner cooking, perhaps filled also with the lively energy that often precedes a long-awaited dinner party, a chance to celebrate the return of a long-lost friend, in this case, the resurrected Lazarus and his savior, their savior, our savior, Jesus.

And, as is often the case when a crowd is gathered, the mood can turn from jolly to severe in a matter of seconds, with just a single comment, a sarcastic jab. But I'm getting ahead of myself, because before the party even has a chance to get started, Mary enters the room, performing an act so intimate, so extravagant, that a hush must have come over the entire house, all eyes turned to watch her with Jesus. The image of Mary on the floor in front of Jesus, anointing his dusty feet, cracked and blistered from his journeys, with a jar of ointment that

would have cost her a year's wages. It is a moment so private, it is enough to make one blush and turn away.

Then, in the midst of that hush, in the quiet moment shared between teacher and disciple, between worn traveler and host, Judas jumps in, ending the silence with a voice seething with greed, with arrogance, and probably with the pain and knowledge of his betrayal. He calls Jesus out, accuses him of frivolity by permitting Mary to perform this act of spontaneous love. Not because Judas is concerned with caring for the poor, the Gospel writer makes a point of reminding us that Judas himself holds the common purse and steals from it. But to catch Jesus in a moment of supposedly forgetting his own teachings about poverty and justice. And Jesus responds, "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

And this is where I'd like to pause for a moment, letting the frame freeze on the image of Mary at the foot of Jesus, Judas standing at his side, the other guests crowded in the door frame. "The poor you always have with you..." For those of you here who, like me, consider Jesus to be your savior, constant companion and teacher, this is a phrase that may cause no small amount of consternation. In fact, it may cause such confusion upon reading, that you wonder, like me, if John has made some dreadful typo, or if his scribe left out a sentence or two that explains what Jesus meant when he said that we will always have the poor with us.

It is, to me, a very un-Jesus-y statement. It seems to stand against all of his other teachings. "The poor you will always have with you" is not a statement of Christian hope, nor a statement about our refusal to accept anything other than the fullness of life for all humanity, nor a pronouncement that the meek shall inherit the earth and the last shall go first. It is a statement that seems to lack the abundance and extravagance of God's love. Are we to believe that Jesus has given up on us? Surely not. And yet, we are jarred awake from this dreamy, intimate moment by Judas' sarcastic bating, and Jesus' shocking response.

After years of working in social services in New York City- as a street outreach worker to the mentally ill homeless who fill the darkest nooks of our city, and counseling women without homes, without families, without the basic necessities that many of us take for granted, I have learned to cling gratefully to my God who looks out for the least among us, first and foremost. I rely upon my God who insists that we all have life, and have it abundantly. And so I cannot help but stop here and wonder what to make of this phrase that seems so out of place.

My first instinct is to puff up my chest, point my finger, and say, "Wait a second, Jesus, you've got it all wrong! You've made a mistake. The poor won't always be with us! How could you say such a thing? Look how many of us are working our tails off to find a solution to poverty: NGOs and religious institutions and nonprofit organizations and some politicians and remarkable individuals and children, struggling mightily to end poverty for all humans, every where. Truly, we are making a difference."

And then my second instinct is to deflate all that hot air and take a good look around me. As people who live or work or worship in an urban setting such as New York City, this vision of the poor seems all too real. It might even be impossible to live through an entire day without being forced to contemplate the inequality of the human community- on the subway, outside the corner deli, in the crowded passageways of Penn Station, on the park benches, over the steaming

grates, outside our apartment buildings. And that's just speaking of those who lack material wealth. Truly, the poor are with us.

And then, luckily for me and for you, my third instinct kicks in. Though it's not really mine. It is the quiet that comes from reading and rereading a text, from living in those words day in and day out. From taking those words and turning them over, flipping them around. From kneading those words with the yeast that is the Holy Spirit, and watching them rise.

Jesus' words do not come in the vacuum of a single story, but in the context of his ministry, of his life among us, and of the eternal span of God's reign. And in that context, new meanings emerge, not to suit our needs necessarily, but to point us towards God's truth for us. It is a tricky hermeneutic, one that may resemble another type of interpretation that is used by some to interpret Scripture for a particular religious or political agenda. That's not what I'm talking about, though there is always the danger that we will, as the theologian Shirley Guthrie points out, "find *IN* the Bible only what we take with us *TO* it- that we will use it to confirm what we already think and will hear only what we want to hear."ⁱ

But this does not mean that interpretation of difficult passages in Scripture should be left to pastors and theologians, or that these harder passages remain inaccessible. It does mean that we read all Scripture in light of who Christ is and what he did; in the light of God's overwhelming love; and in light of our response to that love. The Second Helvetic Confession, a Reformed creed found in our Book of Confessions, says that orthodox and genuine interpretation of Scripture is that which agrees with "the rule of faith and love." And not only that, but also that "any interpretation of Scripture is wrong that shows indifference toward or contempt for any individual or group inside or outside the church."ⁱⁱ

Simone Weil, a remarkable religious philosopher and essayist of the twentieth century, in her book entitled, *Waiting for God*, suggests that the Gospel of Jesus Christ "makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice."ⁱⁱⁱ Let me say that one more time: The Gospel of Jesus Christ makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice.

Thus, acts of love are simultaneously acts of justice; acts of justice are simultaneously acts of love. One cannot be without the other. There is no justice if there is not love, and vice versa.

This, I believe, is the key to understanding our text this morning.

For Jesus, Mary's act of love does not outweigh or cancel out the commandment to serve the poor. It is not an either/or proposition as Judas makes it seem. Mary's act is not frivolous, not in the slightest. Perhaps Mary recognizes that Jesus is afflicted, afflicted with the knowledge that his death is imminent. She responds with no hesitation. She grabs that precious jar off the shelf and rushes to his side. Perhaps she was saving that jar for the day of Jesus' burial, as Jesus says. Yet in that moment, she sees his need, and she responds.

Or perhaps Mary sees a tired friend, worn out from traveling, and offers hospitality. Maybe she needs no reason at all to anoint her friend and teacher.

Either way, it is beautiful. And, I believe, it is essential. Can we even imagine a world, a world into which Jesus has come, where an act of love such as this is considered frivolous? Or unnecessary?

And so, what of Jesus' words, "You always have the poor with you." I believe that Jesus offers us this as an invitation, not as judgment. As possibility, not as failure. We have the opportunity to demonstrate love of neighbor and justice every day, and we should respond. And respond out of gratitude for all that God has done for us. We can think of it as our obligation, our duty, our solemn charge, to give of ourselves, and these are true. But we can also think of it as God's gift to us- a blessing and opportunity- to answer God's love for us with acts of compassion. Mary had this one moment to offer herself to Jesus in this special way, and she had a lifetime of moments to offer herself to others.

Last week, you heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son, as told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. There is a moment at the very end of the story that bears a striking resemblance to this moment in the Gospel of John.

When the father comes seeking his eldest to join the party for his youngest, he finds the elder brother puffed up with anger and resentment. The father responds by saying, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

"You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." What if this is what Jesus meant when he responded to Judas? "The poor are always with you, and all that is yours is theirs."

These are words of justice, of course, but they are also words of love. The spontaneous act of love that Mary offers is of the same love that we have for our neighbors, our neighbors of plenty and our neighbors of want, our neighbors in health and our neighbors in affliction. It is our daily charge to love our neighbor through acts of justice, just as it is our daily charge to offer spontaneous, intimate acts of love.

Jesus' message to Judas, and thus to us, is not then a doomsday message of our failed efforts to alleviate poverty. It is a reminder that we have a chance at every moment to express our love of neighbor. It is a message that requires us to stare deeply into the reality of poverty, then refuse to accept it as God's plan for us. It is a message desiring the end of poverty, all kinds of poverty, and it is a message of intimacy, of God's extravagant love for us individually.

It is a call to the full expression of love and justice, expressed in the act of cradling a small child and presenting her for baptism into the community of faith. In the act of offering a sandwich and a cot to a tired man, hungry and without a place to rest his head. In the act of romantic love between two people. In the act of demanding human rights for all individuals. In the act of throwing a party for a returning loved one. In the act of unconditional love and support to a loved one who never left. In the act of anointing the body of one about to leave this earth.

And, above all, in the act of remembering daily that all that is ours is offered to another.

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ⁱGuthrie, Shirley. Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

ⁱⁱ“The Second Helvetic Confession.” The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A): Part 1- The Book of Confessions. Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱWeil, Simone. Waiting for God. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951.

ⁱ Guthrie, Shirley. Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

ⁱⁱ “The Second Helvetic Confession.” The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A): Part 1- The Book of Confessions. Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Weil, Simone. Waiting for God. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951.