

LENT 5C 2025

Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church

Wilmington, Delaware

April 6, 2025

There's a sentence at the end of today's Gospel that has always bothered me. It's not one of those "Jesus, I really wish you hadn't said that" sentences, about something I don't want to follow. It's my difficulty in accepting the reality of the statement. "The poor will always be with you."

This comes in the context of an intimate gathering at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom Jesus has recently raised from the dead. Martha is busy in the kitchen and Lazarus is probably still a bit lost in the meaning of what has happened to him, while being aware that he will have to experience death a second time. There are those plotting to make that sooner rather than later, because a lot of folks started to believe Jesus is the Messiah because of Lazarus' new life. We're not told how all that worked out for Lazarus, but we know that he will have to experience death again however it occurs.

Mary comes into the room, opens a bottle of expensive perfume, and pours it on Jesus' feet. Judas, the treasurer of the group of disciples, objects. The perfume costs about the same as a year's wages for the average worker. And while we're not told this, it's easy to imagine that Judas wasn't the only one wondering why it wasn't sold to help raise money for the poor. Matthew and Mark put that question from the disciples, plural.

"She's preparing for my burial," Jesus says. Then comes that sentence. "The poor you have always with you, but you will not always have me." We know about the physical aspect of that last part and what follows. But my problem is with the first part. Why in God's creation, which was first pronounced "good," do we continue to have issues of poverty, homelessness, and starvation? In other words, why hasn't God fixed that by now?

Actually, God has done just that.

In the book of Deuteronomy, the book where Moses summarizes everything he's taught the Hebrew people just before he leaves them and they move into the promised land without him, we have this instruction:

*There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.*

*If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 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.' [Deut. 15:4-11]*

A lot has been written and said regarding John's perspective on Judas' hypocrisy and Mary's devotion. But Jesus' words, while compassionate toward Mary and her extravagant gift, express the reality that leads him toward the cross. That reality is that we too often choose not to obey the teachings that have been given to us. Furthermore, our disobedience not only sent Jesus to the cross, it continues to crucify him in the form of those whom he said will always be with us. I dare you to ask those losing food assistance what it feels like to face crucifixion because the wealthiest nation in the world chooses to not follow what Moses teaches us, choosing instead to follow the last words of Rhett Butler.

Some might point out that Moses says these commandments apply only to those who are also Israelites. And in Moses' time, that may have been true. But in another place he teaches them that they are to treat the alien in their land as one of their own, for they too, especially as they stand on the Moab side of the Jordan River as he speaks, were once aliens in a foreign land, and God heard their cries for deliverance. And, by the way, they will be aliens in the land they will soon enter. Even if they use a boat named "Mayflower."

Then we have Paul's words that in Christ "there is no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, servant nor free," but that all are made one in Christ's death and resurrection. It is into that death, and in hope of that resurrection, that we are baptized, and in our tradition, make a vow to "seek and serve Christ in all persons" and "strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being." Those vows, by the way, the church treats with the same seriousness as those made before the altar in holy matrimony.

So, looking at the sacrifice that Jesus is about to make while having dinner with his closest friends at Bethany, just a few days before the Passover they, and we, will never forget, I ask you to consider what you give in return. I'm not seeking an offering that will meet the remainder of this year's budget. I'm also not expecting you to single-

handedly solve the problem of poverty in Wilmington, Delaware. But I won't deny you the opportunity to do either—or both of those things.

I'm asking you to consider the abundance of life God gives you, that extravagant gift of mercy, grace, and forgiveness offered on the cross of Jesus, and what you give back in thanksgiving for all of that.

I wonder what our little part of the world would be like if the aroma of our extravagant grace filled the air around us. Let's break open the jars we keep so tightly sealed for ourselves and find out.