

Lent 5
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“You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” If ever there was a line from scripture that has been ill used and out right abused, this one little line from John’s gospel is at the top of the list. Those of us who believe that social justice is one of the core themes of the gospels cringe when this line is lifted out of context and used to justify not assisting the poor.

So if this passage of scripture is not to be used for the purposes of developing a hard hearted attitude toward poverty, what then is it about? To get a good perspective on this passage, we have to look at where this passage is placed in the gospel of John. We often hear from real estate agents the phrase location, location, location, meaning of course that where you buy is probably more important than what you buy. Location and placement within the gospels is also true with scripture. Where a story occurs in the gospel can have, not always, but it can make all the difference in the world with regard to its meaning. When it comes to the Jesus’ anointing by Mary of Bethany, this is certainly the case. This gospel story is placed very close to Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion and that placement in the gospel sheds a great deal of light on the story’s meaning.

The anointing of Jesus at this particular point in the gospel is much more than Mary doing a loving action for Jesus. It is a foreshadowing of his death, as anointing was what was done to people after they died. The other clue we have that this text is foreshadowing Jesus’ death is the fact that John adds the detail that Mary is anointing Jesus’ feet. Why would this seemingly insignificant detail be added? Because in fact anointing the feet of a living person was not common practice whereas anointing the feet of the dead was a part of the preparation for burial that was standard practice in that time in history. Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet also points toward the foot-washing story that occurs in the upper room in the very next chapter of John 13.

The other aspect of this story that cannot be overlooked is the voice of the one who is criticizing Mary and that of course is Judas. Suspicions about Judas’ sincerity and loyalty to Jesus are already depicted in this gospel and this story only confirms that Judas is up to no good. This story is a prime example of the necessity of reading John’s gospel on both a literal level and also symbolic level.

In a recent sermon for the house of the bishops meeting, our presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori used a wonderful image in terms of being able to see scripture in a multi-layered way. She talked about how some fish have what are called bipartite eyes. In other words these fish are able to see simultaneously both above the water and below the water. Their brains are able to interpret these two very different images at the same time and make a coherent whole. We need to use bipartite eyes when reading John’s gospel, as there is almost always more than one meaning.

The story of the anointing at Bethany is telling us to stop and pay attention to Jesus. He doesn't have much time with us.

This ability to see things in a different light is critical to our survival in this world. There is no question that people in this area are feeling pressured by the economy. The bad economic times are having a direct impact on the membership of our church. At least five active families will be leaving the area to pursue jobs in other parts of the country. That is completely understandable. But for those who are, for whatever reason staying put, we need to begin to see the possibilities and not cave into the burden.

We need to use bipartite vision. As a relative newcomer to the area, I have to tell you that I find the lack of public transportation to be appalling. I have never, ever lived anywhere where there is no public transportation. Ah, but the other day I thought someone should start a private vanpool that would transport people to work. What if there were vans running all over the metro-Detroit area saving people the stress of having to drive to work each and every day. What if all the unhappily or unemployed people of St. John's started a private van company that not only transported people to work but also brought people to church on Sundays. What if, what if? What if people who took the buy-out tried to pursue their life passions and start their own businesses? What if someone got serious about marketing the city of Detroit and focused on the positive things about this city instead of always talking about the problems? For example, in my humble opinion, the Eastern Market in Detroit has much more to offer than the famed Pike Place Market in Seattle. The difference is in the marketing.

It is the development of this bipartite vision that enables us to see not only the many layers of meaning in our scripture stories but the many layers of possibility in our lives. Mary of Bethany's anointing of Jesus was not just a loving action, it was pointing toward the future. Jesus' saying: "You will always have the poor with you." has nothing to do with not helping the poor. It is about living in the present because we don't know what the future might bring. As we move ever closer to Holy Week, it is the ability to experience and understand scripture through many different lenses that will enrich our faith as well as our lives. Let your prayer and imagination loose. Who knows where God will direct you?