

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

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Fascinating story! All four Evangelists tell it in their own way. There are many similarities, but interesting differences as well. In each story a woman interrupts dinner to anoint Jesus with oil or perfume. Luke and John say she bathed Jesus' feet. Matthew and Mark say she anointed his head. All but Luke report that she was criticized for her extravagance. The critics claimed she should have sold it and given the money to the poor. Jesus defends her saying that she had bought it to prepare his body for burial. Then he comments, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

It's interesting how often Jesus seems to be on the wrong side of the law while carefully observing the law. Some criticize him for healing on the Sabbath. They were technically right, of course. Yet, Jesus regularly keeps the Sabbath. Perhaps we could say that Jesus always keeps the Sabbath, except when he doesn't. We hear the same argument elsewhere when the disciples are criticized for eating grain without first washing their hands. Presumably they always washed their hands, except when they didn't. Nowadays, we might use the word ordinarily. Ordinarily one should obey the law, except when circumstances call for a different obedience.

In Deuteronomy 15:7-11 we read, "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.'" Following our prior logic, we can say that ordinarily we should feed the poor, except when something more urgent is at hand. Those who criticized Mary did not perceive the exception to the rule. Assuming they were advocating obedience to the law of Moses, they had strong legal and moral support. Jesus acknowledges as much, by saying, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." In other words, ordinarily feeding the poor is a priority, but in this case something more urgent was at hand. Mary, anointing Jesus for burial, accomplished the more urgent task and was deserving of praise.

How often I have heard people use Jesus' quote as a justification for doing nothing to help the poor. They passively shrug their shoulders as if they were helpless to do anything, "Even Jesus said you'll always have the poor with you." Their looking-for-loopholes attitude implies that caring for the poor is the exception, not the rule. However,

when I take this story seriously, I realize that it's the other way around. There are no loopholes to caring for the poor. Caring for the poor is the rule, except when something more urgent intrudes, something like anointing Jesus' body for burial. That's not a loophole permitting avoidance, but an urgent need that supersedes. In other words it is not a way out of the law, but a deeper way in.

The challenge before us is to recognize that sometimes there are exceptions to the rule of caring for the poor, but they're always exceptions that go over and above, not around, obedience to the law. In John's gospel, Jesus says "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Then he takes up his cross and dies. In Philippians 2:7, Paul states that Jesus emptied himself, literally poured himself out of himself, taking the form of a servant, a slave, being obedient even to death on the cross. Here in John's gospel Mary anoints Jesus' body, not only for burial as Jesus claims, but also in dedication of his journey to the cross. She marvelously demonstrates the kind of love Jesus commanded, the love that led him to pour out his life for our sakes.

When we love as Jesus loved, when we pour out our lives for the sake of others as Jesus did, the question of an occasion for exception will not arise. Those who are looking for loopholes have not given their hearts to the mission of Jesus. Mary was not avoiding caring for the poor. She was overcome with devotion to her Lord in a particular way that called her beyond simply caring for the poor by anointing their Lord and ours for his passion and death.

Some in the Christian community treat caring for the poor as an urgent priority. Others still excuse themselves from responsibility by assuming the poor will always be with us. "It's not our problem," the officers at Publix, Inc. state. But that attitude betrays them. Their hearts are not in it. They have chosen the way of the loophole. Other corporations, Yum Brands, McDonalds, Burger King, Whole Foods, to name a few have chosen, instead, to get involved. To be sure they took their own economic interests into consideration. Yet they committed to pay an additional penny and a half a pound that is to be passed along to the workers. Further they are supporting a code of conduct for treatment of workers that respects the workers as people, children of God.

The way of hope is the way of devotion that seeks to serve Jesus wholeheartedly as Mary did. May we follow her example of a heart filled with love for all of God's children.