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Sermon 23 AUG 2020 SOURCE

JSW 3: Jesus Says WHAT About the Poor?

- JOHN 12
  - 1 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."
  
- AUDIO: (announcer) It's time to gather your friends and family, get out your Bibles and your sermon notes, and open your hearts and minds, because this is the THIRD Sunday in a sermon series called "and then, Jesus says what?"
  
- Good morning. We are so glad to have you with us today—whenever it is that you're joining us—we are thankful that you have gathered with us in this virtual space. Wherever and whenever we are worshipping together, the Spirit is present with us all, binding us together in the love of God—and my hope is that you will be made especially mindful of the presence of the Holy Spirit with you, where you are as you worship with us. I believe that God has something profound and life-changing to say to each of us this morning if we have ears to hear

- Today is the THIRD Sunday in our sermon series that's called "and then, Jesus said what?" and for the last couple of weeks we have been looking at, and thinking about, and studying together, some of the more difficult statements that are ascribed to Jesus in the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John--things that Jesus says that can be a bit confusing, or easy to misinterpret—statements that make us wonder how Jesus can say the OTHER things he does in the New Testament and still say THESE things
- And so this sermon series is not simply about providing the answers to "what does this mean" or "what's the correct interpretation" of these statements—it's also about considering HOW we read the Bible, and what we do when we find things in the Bible—even words that come straight from the mouth of Jesus--that might not be easy to understand, things that are not obvious or straightforward, but challenging—even difficult.
- And so we began on August 9th by looking in Matthew's gospel, chapter 10, and the title of that sermon was "Jesus says WHAT about peace?" because we saw that as Jesus talks with his disciples, he says: I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
- That sounded odd for Jesus to say, since Jesus is the Prince of Peace, the one who said "blessed are the peacemakers," the one who is described by Paul as "our peace." But as we studied what that meant, we saw how the way that people respond to those who speak prophetically, to prophets, and the way people responded to Jesus, created an atmosphere of division and conflict, and we saw how Jesus was telling his disciples that they could expect to be met with that

kind of division--with opposition and rejection and even execution as they followed him and went out to do what he had given them authority to do. But we also saw that even though Jesus' disciples might find themselves in the midst of turmoil externally, they could have peace internally.

- And then last week we looked at chapter 14 of Luke's gospel, and our sermon was called "Jesus says WHAT about parents?" because in one of the verses we read Jesus says you can't be my disciple unless you hate your parents, and your family, and even your own life. And we examined the Greek word, *miseo*, that is translated as "hate" in English, and we saw that even though the idea of hating your parents and family and your life sounds extreme, even shocking, it was part of the way that Jesus was telling the crowds who listened to him that there was a difference—a BIG difference—between being a FOLLOWER of Jesus and someone who is just tagging along to watch the show. Being a follower of Jesus means saying "I'd rather have Jesus than anything"—family, life, possessions—anything.
- Today we're going to be looking at the first 8 verses of Chapter 12 of John's gospel, and our sermon title is "Jesus says WHAT about the poor?" because we're going to start off by thinking about Jesus' statement in verse 8, which he also makes in Matthew 26 and Mark 14—a statement that is often repeated more closely to the way it appears in the NIV translation and in several other versions, and that statement is: "The poor you will always have with you."
- "The poor you will always have with you."

- I have many times heard these words quoted in a certain way, and I have heard others say that they have heard them used in this way, and the way that they are used, and the situation that they are used in, goes something like this—
- Someone will be talking about some effort to alleviate poverty, or to meet some need in a given community, it could be anything, from something as complex as a general welfare safety net, or universal basic income, or a church's ministry to the homeless, to something as simple as a food bank, or a charity fundraiser, and instead of discussing the merits of an idea—or the absence of merit if it's a bad idea—someone will say knowingly, "Well you know, Jesus said 'the poor you will always have with you'"
- And what they mean by that is something like, "look, poverty is part of the natural order of things—Jesus said so--it's ordained by God and it will never change—there are always going to be poor people, and people in need, and to try to change that is a fool's errand—you might just as well try to change the tides of the sea, or the rising and setting of the sun, or try to win a political debate on Facebook—it's not gonna happen, so don't waste your time."
- Now IF that's what Jesus means here in John 12 verse 8 and in Matthew 26 and in Mark 14, then that is surprising, and confusing, because elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus is pretty emphatic and straightforward about loving others as ourselves and meeting their needs, even going so far as to tell the rich young ruler to sell all that he has and give it to the poor—and we'll be looking at that command in a few weeks in this series—and so if this is a correct interpretation

of Jesus' words here, if Jesus is indeed saying "don't waste your time on those in need" then that certainly seems to contradict what Jesus says in other places.

- On the other hand, it could be that Jesus is not saying that at all.
- And so I want us to look at what Jesus IS saying here in verse 8, but that's just going to be where we start, because I think that there is much that God wants to say to us this morning in these 8 verses.
- So let's get our bearings here in these 8 verses in John chapter 12, and remind ourselves of what's happening here. It is 6 days before the passover, just before Jesus enters Jerusalem and the familiar events of Holy Week that lead up to the crucifixion and resurrection happen.
- Jesus is in Bethany, where Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha live. Now Bethany is also where Lazarus died, and was buried for 4 days, and was stinking up the place until Jesus finally showed up and raised him. That was when Mary told Jesus, "if you'd been here Lazarus wouldn't have died." That was just before Jesus commanded him to leave the tomb. And so now in chapter 12, Lazarus sits at the dinner table with Jesus and some others, and Martha, as she does, is serving everybody. This is a dinner for Jesus, and in verse 3 John tells us that Mary took a pound of pure nard and anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair.
- Nard is a costly, precious perfume that is used in religious ceremonies and in burial rituals—and to be as precious and fragrant as it is, you'd think they could've come up with a better name for it than "nard." I mean, I know, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but nard just doesn't sound pleasant, does

it? And Mary takes a whole POUND of the stuff, not just a teeny tiny little bit, not just a “nard-ini” I think the Greek word is--- or maybe that’s a word I heard somewhere else—but she takes a pound of this nard and anoints Jesus’ feet, and we’re told that the fragrance of this stuff filled the whole house. So John is really giving us some detail, letting us imagine what the scene smelled like.

- John has just mentioned another smell in the chapter before, when he told us that Lazarus’ body had been decomposing in the middle Eastern heat for 4 days and he stunk—but here the aroma is pleasant and fragrant.
- But John tells us that one of Jesus’ disciples, Judas, is there, and he lets us know that Judas is about to betray Jesus, and John tells us that Judas expresses some concern about the situation, and says “why wasn’t this costly nard sold—for about one year’s wages—and the money given to the poor?”
- And in another parenthetical bit of information, John lets us know that Judas couldn’t care less about the poor, he just wants to line his pockets with the money that they could’ve gotten if they’d sold this nard
- And then verses 7 and 8 are Jesus’ response to Judas. He says “Leave her alone, she’s preparing my body for burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”
- Now a similar situation, as we said, is described in Mark 14 and Matthew 26, but in their versions, while Jesus IS in Bethany he’s at the home of Simon the Leper, and Mary and Martha and Lazarus aren’t mentioned—it’s an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus with nard or an ointment in an alabaster jar—and it’s not Judas who disagrees with what’s happening, but in Matthew, it’s the disciples,

and in Mark it's just some people who were there. But in both of their versions, Jesus still says "you always have the poor with you but you will not always have me."

- There's also a scene in Luke 7—we looked at it back in September of last year—where Jesus is anointed by a woman who is a sinner at a dinner-- hosted by a Pharisee--named Simon—and so, as Pastor Tasha pointed out when we talked about Mary Magdalene a few weeks ago, all these similar stories and similar names and places can sometimes get confusing and confused and merge together
- But we are going to focus on John's account today. And to do so, we're going to look at the 3 people involved in this triangle of conflict that arises when Judas critiques the situation in John chapter 12. Those 3 people are Jesus, and Judas, and Mary.
- And as we look at their words and actions, I think we'll better understand what Jesus means when he says "You always have the poor with you."
- So first I want to look at Jesus here in this scenario—and I want to offer two observations about what Jesus says.
- The first observation that I want to make about what Jesus says here is this: **Jesus does not contradict himself.** What Jesus says here and what he says elsewhere in the New Testament are not in conflict. The Jesus who says the poor you will always have with you is the same Jesus who says love your neighbour as yourself, who is anointed to bring good news to the poor, who tells the host of

that dinner in Luke 14 that when he gives a banquet he should invite those who cannot possibly repay him.

- How so? First, just from a literal and practical perspective, just because a situation doesn't go away, that doesn't mean we shouldn't pay attention to it. The fact that those in need will be "always with you" is not an excuse to ignore them—there are plenty of things that we always have with us
- Imagine a couple of new parents who bring their newborn baby home and feed him on the first day, but not on the second because he's always hungry--his hunger is always with them, it never goes away, it always comes back and they have to feed him again—so they just ignore it--you'd think that was foolish, wouldn't you? Babies keep getting hungry, we keep getting hungry, other people keep getting hungry again after they are fed—the need is always with us, and we have to keep meeting it.
- The same could be said for a great many other things, like learning—I don't stop reading books just because I can never learn everything, just because there's always more to learn; you wouldn't stop taking care of your garden, or cleaning your house just because you can't just do it once and you never have to do it again.
- In medicine, we don't stop treating patients or helping people stay well just because they keep getting ill—we don't stop trying to eradicate specific diseases just because we can't eradicate disease in general. No, we keep at it, one disease at a time, smallpox, polio, COVID-19—one patient at a time—



- The early church in the second chapter of Acts didn't stop meeting each other's needs just because they kept needing help—no, as a need arose, they met it, and they kept on doing it
- Even though there will always be those in need-- financial, emotional, physical, spiritual--we don't use that as an excuse to do nothing—no we keep at it, one need at a time,
- And THAT is what Jesus is saying here—in fact, Jesus is quoting scripture that says just that. And this is my second point about what Jesus says here: **Jesus is quoting scripture.**
- Have you ever heard anyone say the first part of a phrase and assume that you'll know what comes after? For instance, if I say “spare the rod,” you probably know that the next part of that phrase is “and spoil the child.” So saying “spare the rod” actually means just the opposite, but only if you know that I'm quoting Proverbs 13:24. And there are plenty of other phrases like that—I could say “pearls before swine,” or “a rose by any other name,” and if you know your Bible or your Shakespeare, you know the rest of those phrases.
- And in the same way that someone we might speak to would know their Bible or their Shakespeare, those that Jesus speaks to would have known their Torah, and would have recognised that when he says “the poor are always with you,” Jesus was alluding to Deuteronomy chapter 15, where we read starting with verse 7:
  - 7 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. 8 You

should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. 9 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. 10 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. 11 Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, (that is, since the poor you will always have with you) 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.”

- And so, far from suggesting that we needn't concern ourselves with others in need because the problem never goes away, Jesus is saying, repeating the words of God Himself, because the problem never goes away, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”
- Jesus says this to Judas. And I like the way that American writer Kurt Vonnegut (he wrote one of my favourite short stories, called *Harrison Bergeron*)—I like the way he reads Jesus' words here. Vonnegut thinks that Jesus' words to Judas are a thinly-veiled critique, a sarcastic jab at Judas' hypocrisy—he thinks that “the poor will always be with you,” is a way of saying “oh, you'll have plenty of opportunities to help the poor, Judas, since you're SO worried about them—you leave Mary alone—you just worry about yourself”—because Jesus knows that Judas isn't concerned about the poor, but about his own pockets. Jesus is not-so-

subtly pointing out that Judas' words and his heart are in opposition to each other.

- Now let's think about what Judas says and does in this scenario for a moment.
- I want us to notice two things about Judas here.
- First, let's take Judas' words at face-value. Let's look at what Judas says AS IF he were sincere.
- Judas SAYS: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" His words criticise Mary for a lack of good stewardship because he thinks she has wasted what could have been sold to meet the needs of others. And I want to suggest this:
  - **Judas speaks from the perspective of scarcity, even though he is in the presence of the one who brings abundance.**
- Judas was there at the feeding of the five thousand—that was back in chapter 6 of John's gospel. Judas has seen the way that Jesus can multiply even what does not look like it's going to be enough into that which is sufficient for the needs of others with plenty left over. Judas has seen Jesus bring healing and restoration and reverse even the loss of life itself.
- But Judas looks at Mary's extravagant sacrifice and questions it—asking why didn't we turn this offering into cash? Why suffer a loss when we could have seen a profit? As if giving generously to Jesus would mean that there wouldn't be enough to give to others.
- Judas knows better. Judas has seen Jesus bring abundance from scarcity, life from death, fullness from emptiness, healing from brokenness—and yet he still

asks “why didn’t you sell this precious commodity? Why didn’t you turn to the world’s marketplace and rely on its system of exchange to give you what it’s worth? Why would you waste it by just emptying it out for Jesus?”

- Apparently, Judas has not learned how God’s provision works.
- **And so, the second thing I want to suggest about Judas is this, Judas is hiding his greed behind a concern for others.**
- Judas has no interest in generosity, no interest in helping others, no interest in emptying out his OWN pockets—but he’s more than ready to let Mary sacrifice by selling what she has in order to generate some cash for himself.
- And he does so behind a veil of charity. He’s wearing a mask. Oh, we know what it is to wear a mask these days, don’t we? Judas wants to look like he’s got a heart of benevolence, but the fact is, and John doesn’t beat around the bush here, the fact is, he’s a thief.
- And notice that Judas isn’t suggesting selling one of HIS possessions, he’s not proposing that HE contribute to the poor—he’s talking about MARY’s possession--
- It’s easy to be charitable with other people’s money, isn’t it? Especially when it profits us—but it means something when it comes out of our own pockets—and Mary could have held on to this precious possession—she could have said, “this is worth a year’s wages, I’m going to hang on to this for a rainy day” or she could have sold it and done something else with the proceeds—but she doesn’t do that. She empties it out at Jesus’ feet.

- And so finally I want us to consider Mary. Mary doesn't say a word in these 8 verses, but her actions speak volumes.
- First, **Mary gives extravagantly**. She sacrifices to Jesus an offering worth a year's wages—and she does so in an extravagant way—this is a spectacle—she embraces the indignity of removing her hair covering and wiping Jesus' feet with her hair—this is an intimate and excessive gesture—it is over the top—and it may be that Judas, like Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7, feels that this gesture is improper—it looks bad, and it smells up the place while they're trying to have dinner—and on top of everything else, Judas thinks Mary is a poor manager of money, because she's just pouring cash out on Jesus' feet
- But **Mary isn't concerned with what Judas thinks**. That's our second point. Mary is not looking to Judas for approval. She's not looking to Judas for advice about table manners, or financial guidance, or even for counsel about how to address the socioeconomic needs of those less fortunate.
- What Mary is concerned with is demonstrating her absolute, limitless devotion to Jesus, the one who showed up when she had experienced irreversible, irreconcilable loss—when her brother was dead and buried and decomposing—beyond any hope—Jesus came and wept with her and felt her loss and turned to the tomb and said, "Take away the stone."
- Mary had seen death transformed into life. Mary had seen what happened when Jesus showed up and what was lost was restored, how Lazarus had been bound in the tomb and was now sitting at the dinner table, and so I suspect she had no hesitation at offering a pound of pure nard to anoint Jesus' feet.

- I suspect she did so joyfully.
- I suspect she did so expectantly.
- Did she know what Jesus meant when he said she was anointing his body for burial? When he said I'm not going to be around for much longer? I don't know, but I do know that Mary had seen the power of Jesus over death and the grave, she knew that the stench of death could be transformed into the fragrant aroma of perfume
- She knew that what is emptied out will be filled, that what is offered up will be multiplied, that death and loss have no dominion when Jesus shows up
- And so, while Jesus is with her, she loves him with abandon, she shows affection completely—not with the cold reserve of Judas' devious and strategic schemes for personal profit, not with a restrictive concern for piety and propriety, but with an excessive and ecstatic love that the grace of Jesus accepts, saying, "Leave her alone. She's anointing my body for burial—you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me"
- And how fitting is it that the loss of Jesus is transformed as well—that the sacrifice that Mary empties out reminds us that Jesus makes the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice that is emptied out, transformed from crucifixion into resurrection, from death to life eternal, and so the same Jesus who says "you always have the poor with you but you do not always have me" also says "as you've done it unto the least of these, you've done it unto me" and tells his disciples, "I will be with you always, even unto the end of the world."

- When we see others-- the needy, the hungry, the broken, the lost and the lonely, in short, the poor—Jesus is with us.
- Mary and Judas have shown us this morning two of the many ways we can respond to Jesus' presence.
- We can respond like Judas— We can criticise what others do—we can ask, “why didn't you do things my way?” We can respond with schemes and machinations that require nothing of us, and with false generosity that benefits ourselves and denies the abundant provision of God.
- Or we can respond like Mary—with extravagance and sacrifice, with a love that empties itself out and is met with the grace of an accepting saviour and the transforming, resurrecting power of the Spirit that provides more than we could could ask or imagine.
- Of the two, I'd rather be like Mary this morning, wouldn't you?
- Thank you so much for joining us—may God bless you today—look for opportunities to show the love of Jesus to others—and do so extravagantly, knowing that God's abundance will provide for you today and every day. If there's any worry or anxiety that you're feeling today, let the Lord still your soul—leave it to God to provide, because He is faithful. Amen.