

The Poor You Will Always Have with You

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

Matthew 26:6-13

Let's make one thing perfectly clear from the start. The disciples have a point. When this woman came to Simon the leper's house and poured her perfume over Jesus' head, the stunned disciples said, "Why this waste? What on earth are you doing woman!?!? Have you lost your mind!? There are better ways to use your money!!" And they have a point. Matthew doesn't report this (he simply calls the perfume "very expensive"), but according to Mark, the perfume in the alabaster jar cost three hundred denarii. From other sources we know that one denarius is a fair day's wage for a laborer. So that means 300 denarii would be a year's wages for a laborer. A year's wages, for one bottle of perfume, dumped over someone's head!!! A year's wages gone in a 20 second burst of fragrance! How can you not question such a thing?

If someone came to the worship committee and proposed that we ought to get \$50,000 in hundred dollar bills, mix them with incense, and burn them in the middle of the sanctuary as a fragrant love offering to Jesus, do you think the committee would approve? We would say exactly what the disciples said. "That's a waste! Let's use our money more sensibly, please. Let's put that money in the benevolence fund. Let's give it to missions. That would definitely be my vote."

But in this case, Jesus accepts this woman's extravagant offering. He rejects the talk of waste. He even praises her action and promises that it will never be forgotten. In the process he says something strange "you will always have the poor with you," which doesn't sound like Jesus at all! It sounds like Jesus is saying, "Hey, don't worry so much about the poor." And he says it right after he has just finished preaching the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. You remember that parable, don't you? That parable was supposed to be about *helping* the poor. That's the one where Jesus welcomes into his Kingdom all those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked and generally take care of the needy. He casts out of his Kingdom everyone who does not feed the hungry and clothe the naked; who does not care for the needy. So when the disciples questioned the woman's use of this perfume, they probably thought they were right in line with Jesus' parable. They thought they were building on the sermon Jesus just gave. *But Jesus rebukes them.* This little incident in Simon's house is one of those stories that totally confuses us, and makes us wonder if we really understand Jesus at all.

That's potentially a good thing I think. Our confusion is a sign that maybe we have a chance to learn something. There are some things we can say to help clear up the confusion and get us close to the good news at the heart of this passage. First, I think it's fair to say that *Jesus' accepting this woman's offering after the fact is not the same as recommending it beforehand.* After the woman has burst into the room and dumped the perfume on his head, *after* she has made this tremendous personal sacrifice to show how much she loves Jesus, he accepts what she's done, he is moved by her offering. But, if the woman had come to Jesus beforehand and said to him, "Jesus I want to do something for you and your ministry. I'm thinking of buying an expensive bottle of perfume and pouring it all over you. Do you think that's a good idea, or do you have a better suggestion?" I think there's a good chance Jesus would have suggested giving the money to the poor. I don't know that of course. But given everything else Jesus has said in his teaching ministry, it's a reasonable call. The fact is, when Jesus responds so positively to the

woman's offering, he's not responding so much to the content of what she has done, he is responding to the *Spirit* of her offering. He is responding to her immense love, her immense gratitude, her overflowing generosity.

That's why Jesus says that strange thing about the poor always being with us. When Jesus made that statement, he is alluding to Deuteronomy 15, the passage we read together a little earlier. In verse 11 of Deuteronomy 15 it says: "There will always be poor people in the land." The poor you will always have with you. But you probably noticed that when we read the Deuteronomy passage, it wasn't telling us to ignore the poor, the passage was not saying, "we're always going to have the poor around, we're never going to get rid of poverty, so we may as well give up." Just the opposite. "Since there will always be poverty, I therefore command you, to be open-handed toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in the land." So this is not a dismissal of the poor, it is a recognition of their need! When Jesus quotes verse 11 he is saying "Yes, of course don't forget the poor. My Father commanded you to be open-handed and generous with them. And you need to do that. But for now, let's celebrate this woman's open-handed, generous act."

Actually understanding the Spirit of Deuteronomy 15 will help us understand the heart of our passage. What is the Spirit of Deuteronomy 15? It's a spirit of radical generosity. It calls God's people to go the extra mile for the poor. Verses 7-8 say, "If anyone is poor, do not be hard-hearted or tight fisted toward them, rather be open-handed and lend them whatever they need." The whole Spirit of Deuteronomy 15 is a spirit of overflowing generosity. And in our passage, who shows the Spirit of Deuteronomy 15? Who shows a spirit of open-handed generosity and love? It's not the disciples. They are decidedly ungenerous in their interpretation of this woman's act. They look at this woman with suspicious minds. They don't see the love in her action. They don't see her generosity. They don't see what is good and beautiful about her. All they see is her imperfections and her mistakes. Their reaction is uncharitable, ungenerous. The woman on the other hand overflows with love for her Lord. She abounds in generosity. Even though the content of her action might not be the ideal choice, the spirit of her anointing is just right. And it moves Jesus.

Do you know what this is like? It's like a mother who gets breakfast in bed from her children on Mother's Day. The children are filled with love for their mother and they want to do something for her, and so they make her pancakes and they fry up bacon and they serve it to her in bed. Now, as Mother's Day offerings go, this one is far from perfect. The pancakes are burned on one side. The bacon is so stiff it's starting to crumble. The mess left behind in the kitchen can only be described as apocalyptic. But what is mother's reaction to this imperfect offering? She is moved, because she sees the love, the open-handed generosity behind it. If her kids had come to her beforehand and said, "Mom we are trying to think what to do for you on Mother's Day. Would you like us to make you breakfast in bed, or would you like us to take you out for dinner?" You know what Mom would have chosen. But only an ungrateful and hard-hearted Mother would receive her imperfect offering and say, "You call these pancakes! You call this bacon!!!!? What a waste!"

If you understand this passage, you've got to understand the word 'waste.' In this passage, the waste is the thing that bothers the disciples. "Why this waste!?" they say. But the 'waste' is what Jesus celebrates in this passage. The waste is what blesses Jesus. The thing that makes the woman's offering beautiful is that she goes above and beyond what you would expect. She gives extravagantly. Her love overflows its banks and pours out into the world. She does more than could be asked or imagined, and so, *because it overflows*, even though her offering is

imperfect, *it is full of grace*. Grace is the extra. Grace is extravagant. Grace is the overflow. Grace always has the potential to look like “waste”.

Think of your reaction when someone blesses you, or does something extra for you. You’re moving and on the day you’re supposed to put everything in the truck, four of your friends show up to offer you unsolicited help. What do you say? “Oh, you guys! You don’t need to do this! You’re going to waste your whole Saturday helping me? This isn’t necessary!!” And of course you’re right, it isn’t necessary. It is more than you could ask or imagine. It’s grace. Grace always gives a person more than they expect, more than they deserve. It is a kind of Holy Extravagance. It is a kind of Holy Waste.

The disciples try to turn some children away from Jesus, they are a waste of his time. But Jesus says “Let the little children come to me.” It’s a Holy Waste. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, “if someone wants you to walk with them one mile, walk with them two.” Go the extra mile. Practice Holy Waste. The prodigal son returns home and his excited father throws him a party—a big party. His older brother sniffs, ‘what a waste!’ But it’s the Holy Waste of the Kingdom. God preserve us from a world where there is no Holy Waste. What kind of a world would it be if we only ever gave each other what we deserved, if we had to earn everything we got from each other? What kind of world would it be if we always kept accounts and never gave any extra? It would be a cold, hard existence. Sometimes we need to do things for each other and for God not because they are useful, or practical or efficient, but because we are overflowing with love. I think it’s reasonable, as you read this story, to look at yourself and wonder ‘Does my Spirit ever overflow in gratitude and love like this??’ Could I ever be accused of Holy Waste?’

I realize that there are some of you here this morning who are reserved in temperament, are probably the ones who are most uncomfortable with this sort of question. You’re not the kind of person to do anything like this woman, pouring out perfume on a person in the middle of a meal, this grand, public, romantic gesture. “Does this mean I’m supposed to become an extrovert? Does this mean I’m supposed to become a romantic? I’m a handshake person, does this mean that I have to start hugging now? No. There are ways that shy, introverted people can overflow with love just as well as any charismatic, extrovert.

Thinking about the different love languages helps us here. In the world of romantic relationships, author Gary Chapman has distinguished 5 love languages that people speak. There are at least 5 different ways in which people express romantic love to others.

1. Some people express their love through words.
2. Some people express love by giving gifts.
3. For others affection is displayed through touch.
4. Some people also say ‘I love you’ through acts of service.
5. And finally some people will express love through quality time.

All of these are legitimate, positive ways to express affection. Some of these languages are more suited to extroverts, others to introverts, but it is possible to gush, to overflow in any of these languages.

Just as there are different love languages in the world of romance, there are different love languages in the area of faith. Some people express their faith through joyful, charismatic worship. Some Christians display their faith in words, they freely and easily express their love for Jesus to others. Some Christians are more the service types, their love for Jesus displays itself in work, they are active on a board a committee, they are working in a homeless shelter. Some Christians say I love you to God through constant, quiet prayer. All of these are legitimate, positive powerful ways to express affection, some of these languages are more suited to

extroverts, others to introverts, but it is possible to gush, to overflow in any of these languages. We don't all need to overflow like this woman in her public, charismatic, extroverted way, but all of us ought to let ourselves overflow in one of these languages. Some of us will overflow in our expression of faith and in our testimony. Some of us will overflow in our sending cards to others. Some of us will overflow in tuna casseroles for people who need a meal. Some of us will overflow in service to a committee. All of us should overflow somewhere.

Ultimately however, this good news in this passage is not our acts of overflowing love. Ultimately, it's not just the woman's overflowing generosity that catches Jesus' attention in this passage. Her act reminds him of something. "She has prepared me for burial," he says. This woman's action reminds Jesus of what he will face in the coming week. Jesus watches this woman pour out a year of her life, and he thinks how he will soon pour out his life. Jesus watches this woman give this loving sacrifice, and he thinks about how he will soon be a living sacrifice. Jesus see this woman anoint his head and he thinks how he will soon lay down his life so that others will have the opportunity to be anointed with the waters of baptism. Jesus' whole life is about to be outpoured, for us and for our salvation.

And, just as the disciples questioned the woman's offering, it would be very easy to see Jesus' outpouring as a waste. Think about it, here's me: ordinary person, spotty discipleship record, limited ability, marginal prospects. Here is Jesus: perfect obedience, perfect love, full of power, full of the Spirit. He is going to trade places with me!!?? He is going to give himself for me!!?? That's a terrible trade. That doesn't make any sense at all. What a waste! What an awful waste!! And it is. It is the Holy Waste of grace. And by this Holy Waste, we are all saved.

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