

Lent 5C

Isaiah 43:16-21
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8
Psalm 126

April 3, 2022

Our cat, Rory, has what Christy and I call a chronic fear of missing out. Every morning, he will wait outside our bedroom door for us to come out; every afternoon, he waits at the front door for us to return from work; and every evening, he'll plop himself on our legs, to prevent us from going anywhere else without him. You can look at him and think he's fast asleep, but if you move into another room, invariably he'll only be a second or two behind you, running as fast as his short little legs can take him. He has a seemingly unlimited appetite for affection, and if we have the temerity to pay attention to anything other than him, he'll make his discontentedness known – loudly!

Of course, what our cat wants is to feel loved, and since he can't understand us when we tell him in words, the primary way he feels our love is through the time and attention we bestow on him. And I find that extremely relatable. After all, choosing to give anyone or anything the gift of your attention is an expression that you find them valuable and worthy. As the poet Mary Oliver writes: "Attention is the beginning of devotion."¹

The Gospel reading today is from John 12, and among other things, it is a story of attention and devotion. It takes place just before Jesus was to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus, knowing his time is at hand, decides to visit some of his closest friends, one last time – Mary of Bethany, her sister Martha, and Lazarus. In the previous chapter, in which Lazarus is raised from the dead, the Gospel tells us that Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus.² And so, as Martha is serving the meal, and Jesus is reclining at the table with Lazarus, Mary comes to him with a pound of costly perfume, which she uses to anoint Jesus's feet and wipes off with her hair.

And then, as everyone's attention is focused on this quiet, intimate act of devotion, Judas butts in with an objection: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" And isn't that a good question? 300 denarii – that's almost a year's wages. How much good could be done with that sum?

But what Judas is doing here, is engaging in a form of distraction called "whataboutism." It's when someone tried to discredit another person by bringing up a different, unrelated issue. Here's an example which will likely be familiar to you: someone who, when confronted with the statement that "Black Lives Matter" responds by saying, "But what about all lives? Don't all lives matter?"

The person doing it may not even care about the issue they are bringing up. That's not the purpose. The purpose, rather, is primarily to deflect your attention away from something they would prefer you not to think about. The whatabout issue may or may not actually be a valid concern; in fact, the more valid it is, the more effective the whatabout.

So when Judas sees Mary anointing Jesus, and he says, “But what about the poor?”, he is saying that what Mary has chosen to spend her attention on is improper – that her attention, and the attention of anyone else present, must immediately be redirected. He is only bringing it up in an attempt to distract you from something he would prefer you not to think about.

But let’s acknowledge that the question that Judas brings up is truly an uncomfortable question. So uncomfortable, in fact, that the author of John didn’t want us to spend too much time thinking about it, because they promptly go and do the same thing. They write: “He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief.” Okay, Judas, but what about the fact that you used to steal from us? What about that?

Jesus doesn’t say either of these things. Instead, he defends Mary by saying “You always have the poor with you.”

This particular sentence has itself been a regular fount of whataboutism from certain corners of Christianity. Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, who is co-chair with the Rev. Dr. William Barber of the Poor People’s Campaign, notes in an essay co-written with Willie Baptist that this line is frequently misused to argue one of three things: “a) that we can never end poverty; b) that it is the role of Christians, not the government, to try to care for the poor, or c) that Jesus rather than the poor should be our concern.”³

In 2017, a congressperson from Kansas was defending Kansas’s decision not to adopt the Medicaid expansion through the Affordable Care Act. The Medicaid expansion has been an astonishingly effective tool in reducing poverty in general and medical debt in particular; states that adopted the Medicaid expansion when it first became available in 2014 saw the total amount of medical debt held by the population drop by almost 50%. Reduced medical debt helps not only people’s finances; it has been shown to be associated with increased access to the health care system and better mental health outcomes.⁴ And yet, when this representative was asked why his state hadn’t expanded Medicaid, despite the clear beneficial outcomes, he reportedly shrugged and said, quote, “Just like Jesus said, ‘The poor will always be with us.’”⁵

To use this passage like he did is clearly to ignore the overall momentum of Jesus’s ministry on Earth. Jesus’s first sermon in Luke was to say: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Jesus’s words, “The poor will always be with you” are, in fact, an invocation of the Law given to Israel in Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 11, which says: “There will never cease to be some in need on the earth.”

But what is the context of this line? In Deuteronomy, it comes after a commandment instituting the Sabbath year. The Sabbath year, like the Sabbath day, was to come every seven years. It was similar to the festival of Jubilee. Here, in the words of Deuteronomy, was what was meant to happen every Sabbath year:

“You shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the Lord’s remission has been proclaimed. . . You must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. There will, however, be no one in need among you,

because the Lord is sure to bless you . . . if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.”⁶

“There will be no one in need among you” if you obey this entire commandment, the author of Deuteronomy writes. The line Jesus invokes comes immediately after, saying: “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.’”

So how do we reconcile these two sentences – “there will be no one in need among you” and “there will never cease to be some in need on the earth”? This is, in part, a call to personal generosity, but it is so much more than that. It is saying: poverty is not inevitable; it is caused by injustice. Poverty is a curse, but it is not a curse caused by what those experiencing poverty do. Rather, according to the Deuteronomist, the failure of *those who have much* to obey this commandment, to forgive the debts of *those who have little*, is the cause of their need. It is the sin of oppression that brings about poverty in the oppressed.

So when Jesus says “The poor will always be with you,” it is an indictment of those listening. We say “but what about the poor,” but it is we who have brought about the predicament of the poor. At the same time, Jesus invites us to act. We say “but what about the poor,” but it doesn’t have to be that way. If we obey God’s commandment to act justly and love mercy, there will not be anyone in need.

When you listen to this story, you’ll notice that each of the characters in this story has their own focus; their own special cause, if you will. Mary is focused on worship and beauty; Judas is focused on charity; and the author of John, in criticizing Judas for stealing from the common purse, is focused on integrity. In isolation, there’s nothing wrong with any of these focuses. But Mary alone is praised because she is the only one not pointing fingers; the only disciple not trying to distract others from their mission.

When Jesus pushes back against Judas, he says “leave her alone.” Mary is doing a good thing – she is anointing Jesus for his burial. There may be many other good things she could also do, but that does not detract from the fact that what Mary is doing is good. In the midst of the plots and betrayals that will soon bring Jesus to the cross, Mary is doing what she can. No more is required of her.

Part of the effect of the constant stream of distraction in the world is to demoralize you, to make you feel like nothing will ever get better because there’s always going to be another crisis. The poor will always be with us. There’s another war. Another climate disaster. A new attack on non-conforming youth. Another thousand Covid deaths. These are, as the Collect for today calls them, “the swift and varied changes of the world.” They wear you down; they make you feel like anything you do is futile, so that you give up and go along with the system.

But God does not stop working in the world; and therefore, we should not stop participating in God’s work. As our reading from the prophet Isaiah today says, in the voice of God: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Don’t you see it? Pay attention!

In the midst of the swift and varied changes of the world, our God is a resurrection God. And God is about to do a new thing. We are invited to pay attention to it, and to take part in it ourselves. Will you?

¹ Mary Oliver, *Upstream*, 2016.

² John 11:5

³ Theoharis and Willis, “Reading the Bible with the Poor,” from Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis (2015). An excerpt is available at

https://ms.augsburgfortress.org/downloads/9781451482867_Excerpt%20from%20Chapter%202.pdf.

⁴ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2021/7/29/22598211/medicaid-expansion-medical-debt-credit-ratings-study>

⁵ <https://www.statnews.com/2017/03/03/roger-marshall-kansas-obamacare/>, cited in

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2017/03/03/ignorant-jerks-abusing-poor-will-always-will-always/>.

⁶ Deuteronomy 15:1-5 (NRSV).