

“Justice and Mercy”
John 12:1-8
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Many years ago, just as I was beginning in ministry, I learned a valuable yet unpleasant lesson about church life. The church I served had acquired some land right next to our property. It had a large and old house on it which seemed to be more of a nuisance than anything else, but the land it was on was precious. No definite plan had been made at the time, but the church needed more space for education, fellowship and recreation. So, buying the land for a good price just made sense.

Little did I know that the purchase would spark heated debate. No good gift comes without some fight about how to use it! Most people in the church wanted to use the land to expand education space and build a family life center, but there was an important group of people who thought we should use the old house on the land as a missionary furlough residence. Not only this, they framed the debate in very narrow terms. Anyone who believes in missions will vote to use the house as a furlough residence. Anyone who wants to use the land for any other purpose is selfish and simply not missions-minded.

It was, of course, a false choice. It wasn't an either/or situation. In the end, the church voted to tear down the old house - which would have been a terrible furlough residence, given how high the utilities and maintenance costs would have been - and build new education space, a family life center and a music suite. But before any of those buildings were built, the church also acquired another piece of property with a newer, energy-efficient house and used it as a missionary furlough residence. It was never an either/or choice.

But churches love to squabble over false choices, sometimes because we don't think clearly, sometimes because we just want something to fight about, and quite often because we have unresolved issues with the church or other people and thus, we are not really fighting about the issue at hand.

But we squabble over many either/or matters, both great and small, that aren't really either/or matters. Is Christianity about faith or works? Is baptism a gift from God or our response to God's gift? Is salvation a momentary experience or a lifelong process? Is the most critical part of a church budget the part that is used to support ongoing ministries here or the part that supports missions work beyond our doors? It's like asking whether we love our son or our daughter, whether we want to have something to eat or drink, whether we need the support of God or people. The answer is – yes! These are all false choices.

There is another false choice that grows out of our Gospel reading today, the reading about Mary anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume, Judas getting upset with her and Jesus saying the poor will be with us always. It's not so much the text itself that leads to misunderstanding. It's the way it has been interpreted with a certain agenda in mind. But the end result is a false choice between justice and mercy. If we have a limited amount of resources, how should we use them – on helping the poor or in being kind to people we know? Should we choose justice or mercy? It is a false choice.

But let's back up and examine the story a bit more carefully. It is an action-packed eight verses with vivid images. A small group gathers for a meal in Bethany. It is a first-century Salt Shaker with a fascinating cast of characters. Jesus is there, which is enough to make the meal significant, but Lazraus is also there, the same Lazarus Jesus has just raised from the dead. Martha is there serving the meal, of course, and so is Mary and at least one other person – Judas.

We don't know what they eat – this is not a promo piece for the Food Network – but we do know who is there, and after everyone has eaten, the excitement begins. Mary lets down her hair - very much like a sinful woman in a Pharisee's house in Luke 7 - and anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume, pure nard, which would require a year's earnings from a laborer to purchase. It is an extravagant act and a scandalous one as she not only lets down her hair but wipes his feet with her hair...

Judas blows a gasket. He can't believe Mary would be so wasteful. The nard could have been sold and the money used to help the

poor, though John says he doesn't care about the poor. He wants the money for himself like other money he has taken from the common purse, which he keeps. John is not a writer who tries to redeem Judas in any way. Judas is a straightforward villain in his telling of the story.

But when Judas makes his complaint, Jesus defends Mary, like he always seems to do. "Leave her alone," he says, "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." And Ian says facetiously that I am the bluebird of happiness? Jesus certainly knows how to put a damper on a party, talking about his death right after he has worked his greatest miracle. And he continues. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Well, that's a happy thought...

And a provoking one... What exactly does Jesus mean when he says, "You always have the poor with you..."? There are so many memorable images in this story – Lazarus sitting at the table, Mary anointing Jesus' feet, Martha serving again, Judas verbally attacking Mary, Jesus alluding to his death – but what we tend to remember most is this brief word about the poor. It has been used as an excuse for all sorts of self-indulgence and neglect of the poor. After all, Jesus himself says we will always have poor people. But what exactly does he mean?

We are talking about the same Jesus who spends much of his time among the poor and outcast, the one who says in Matthew 25 that when we respond to the least of these in need, we respond to him. We are talking about the same Jesus who tells the parable about a rich man and another Lazarus in Luke 16, the man who affirms Zacchaeus' promise to give half of what he owns to the poor in Luke 19. It doesn't seem likely that he is saying that because there will always be poor people, we need not worry about them.

In fact, the words Jesus uses here are a quote from the first half of a verse in the Torah which is known in its entirety by all present at this first-century Salt Shaker. The first half of Deuteronomy 15:11 says this. "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth," but the second half of that verse says, "I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" The point is not that since there will always be poor people, don't worry about them. The point is that since there will, help them every way you can.

In fact, the verse in John 12 can be translated as, “Have the poor among you always,” as opposed to, “You will have the poor among you.” In other words – keep them near you, don’t neglect them!

So, what exactly does Jesus mean when he defends Mary, saying the poor will be with you always but he will not? He means that if we are waiting to do something for anyone else until poverty has been eliminated, we will never do it. If we are waiting to do something extravagant to honor him until there are no more poor people, we will never do anything extravagant.

And in this case, what Mary does is not just extravagant, it is an act of kindness, an act of mercy. For what Mary is doing is not just tossing perfume on his feet like athletes spraying champagne after a victory. She is anointing Jesus for burial, perhaps not literally, but symbolically.

How do we know this? Because he says it. “She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” Symbolism is found throughout the Gospel According to John. We are almost never talking about just what we think we are talking about. There are metaphors, symbols and double entendres everywhere. Here the symbolism is straightforward. Jesus is “O.K.” with Mary’s use of perfume because it is an act of mercy toward him. He is headed to his death. He’s not sure anyone will care for his body after death. She has done so in advance.

So, it’s not that justice doesn’t matter. The poor need to be helped, no matter what Judas’ motivation is. But mercy needs to be extended too, especially to Jesus. According to Joachim Jeremias, in rabbinic theology there were two classifications of good works – justice and mercy – and the latter were considered more perfect (as quoted in *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, The Anchor Bible, Raymond E. Brown, p. 449). But both justice *and* mercy were and are important.

So, the message for us is that any call to choose between justice and mercy is suspect whether it concerns the details of a church budget, the way we go about ministry or the way we live our daily lives. We are called to seek justice *and* mercy, to address the needs of the poor and oppressed *and* care for people we know and love. It is not an either/or matter, though there are certainly people who proceed as if it is.

There are people and churches who are very good at caring for their own, and perhaps even support the idea of spreading the Gospel, but who are disinterested in the people living in the communities around them. Baptist missions pioneer Lottie Moon was enraged by this reality, particularly the racism of the American church in her time. How could people who supported her work in China feel such disdain for people in their own neighborhoods simply because of the color of their skin?

But there are also people and churches who speak up for global concerns while ignoring the people closest to them. I think of the character in the musical “Hair” about whom the song “Easy to Be Hard” is sung. He speaks up for justice but ignores his own child. We are called to seek justice *and* mercy, and we do in this church in many ways.

We seek justice through our clothing ministry and BackPack Buddies, clothing and feeding people every week. We seek justice through partnership efforts with Habitat for Humanity, Family Promise, Urban Ministries, StepUp and the work of CBF field personnel Marc and Kim Wyatt with immigrants and refugees. We seek justice in partnership work in Honduras and Arkansas; in disaster relief work; and through our church budget and special missions offerings.

We even seek justice through advocacy for the poor and marginalized, some of us through individual efforts, but also by hosting events like Habitat for Humanity’s training day last year for those who advocate for affordable housing. The Bible speaks of doing justice *and* seeking justice by addressing specific needs *and* addressing social and systemic issues. We seek justice in all of these ways.

We also seek mercy in many different ways. We extend kindness and compassion to those who are hurting. As Mary anoints Jesus for burial, we stand with each other in grief, listen to each other, shed tears together. We offer support to those in need of healing through our prayers and visits, notes and prayer shawls. We offer a listening ear to those who experience an array of challenges ranging from divorce and job loss to mental health issues and spiritual crises.

We don’t do any of this perfectly, but we do offer something and constantly seek to do more. The diaconate’s expansion of congregational care offers just one sign of this reality.

Of course, at the end of the day, there isn't much difference between justice and mercy. We're talking about responding with kindness to whatever people need most in a given moment, whether it is food and clothing, prayer and support, kindness and compassion, or welcome and acceptance. We're talking about treating others as we would want them to treat us. We're talking about loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. The only difference is what specific neighbors need.

I have had a couple of experiences recently which have stuck with me, both connected to the clothing ministry. The Saturday before last I was here for the work day. I split my time between cleaning projects and the clothing ministry. Late in the morning, Dennis Herman and I helped two women carry six large bags of clothing to their car. After we packed them all in, I asked them where they were from, since I detected an accent and heard some Swahili words. They were from Congo.

So, since I have spent a good bit of time in Kenya, we talked a while. As we finished, they thanked me for our clothing ministry and got into the car, but as I walked away, I noticed that they were not moving. I started to walk back and see if they needed directions, but I saw that their heads were bowed. They were praying, giving thanks for the help they had received, and they continued for some time. I walked back inside, moved by their gratitude, and reminded of how small acts of kindness can make a big difference.

Then, Sunday a week ago, as I was walking out after worship, I met a man who wanted to bring in some clothes. I let him in and then walked out with him. He asked a few questions about the ministry, then told me something interesting. He said that every time he buys a new article of clothing, he donates something he already has. He doesn't need more, he said, it's just the right thing to do. Again, I was reminded of how small acts of kindness can make a big difference.

But I also realized that this is how we seek justice and mercy, not in grandiose ways that draw attention, but in simple things we do every day, ordinary decisions we make. That man didn't make much of his effort, but I saw in the prayer of those two women the difference that kind of effort makes. That is why we seek justice and mercy.