

“GOSPEL ECONOMICS”

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Plymouth Congregational UCC
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Text: John 11:55 - 12:-8

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A couple of summers ago, my husband Buzz, who had been living with a serious cancer for well over a decade, was about to have a significant birthday, and it was becoming clear that this might well be his final one.

So I got it together to throw a party. Two couples from our floor at Park Lane brought dishes to share. I made not one, but two desserts.

My plan was to keep it simple and buy a couple of rotisserie chickens, but when I got to King Soopers that morning, they only had one ... and it looked suspiciously like a reject from the previous day.

So I called our son and asked if he could pick up a couple of fat, juicy Costco chickens on their way up to Old Town that evening. He assured me he'd take care of it.

Instead, as the party began, he and his family trooped in with a humongous assortment of barbeque from Nordy's and a boatload of sides. Needless to say, we ate well, and knowing there might not be many more such times together, we celebrated well.

Our reading from John's gospel tells a somewhat similar story.

Chapter 11 takes place in Bethany where, we're told, Jesus did the unimaginable by restoring Lazarus to new life. Crowds of onlookers saw this as a sign of God's presence and power within Jesus – and believed in him.

His critics from the religious establishment, however, were not impressed.

“This Jesus is doing too many signs! He's threatening our authority! If this goes on much longer, the Romans are going to get upset with us.” [paraphrase] So they decreed that anyone aware of Jesus' whereabouts was to turn him in. And Jesus, we're told, begins to lay low, play it safe, avoid crowds. And there was debate among the people about whether or not Jesus would risk going to Jerusalem for the Passover.

But as Chapter 12 begins, despite the threats, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem – for the celebration of Passover, the liturgy of remembering the ancestors' liberation from slavery in the Exodus from Egypt.

John's congregation, the ones who heard his stories and sermons before they became part of his written gospel, were Jews-Considering-Jesus.

In fact, when John's gospel was being assembled there was a great deal of tension between the synagogue and those who thought Jesus might well be their long-awaited Messiah.

In other words there was a schism... a schism over Jesus.

The concern was that Jesus was too popular.

The fear was that he would divide the community. But there was more...

Jesus' critics were the religious establishment. Their job was to maintain the status quo and keep the peace. They were the ones who did the bidding of the Roman Empire in this part of the realm. They obviously had their own reasons for wanting Jesus out of the picture, and the Romans hated rabble rousers of any kind, especially in Jerusalem, especially during Passover. In other words, it was a perfect storm, and Jesus was at the center of it.

So here is Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, and he stops again in Bethany to see his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha. John tells us that Jesus arrives, though very likely that means Jesus and at least a dozen others. For surely, at this point in Jesus' literal and metaphorical journey, he and the disciples are traveling together.

The story is very abbreviated: Martha serves the meal. Lazarus is at the table.

That's all we know until verse 3, when Mary takes it upon herself to anoint Jesus' feet with a costly perfume and wipe them with her hair, filling the house with the fragrance.

It's an extravagant gesture.... A gesture of extravagant hospitality....

But as Jesus realizes – and John is quick to point out –

this anointing is also done in anticipation of Jesus' death.

Jesus knows... His friends know... The threats are real.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and he will die there.

Then Judas speaks up. He protests Mary's actions. He demands to know why this very expensive perfume is being used in such a frivolous way – instead of being sold to help the poor.

But John knows, and Jesus knows, and we know, that this is not a legitimate protest.

Judas did not raise this issue out of concern for the poor. Rather, we're told, he is a thief.

And, ironically, he's the one in charge of the common purse.

The implication is clear: If the perfume were sold and the money given to Jesus to help out some inner city folks in Jerusalem, there would be just that much more for Judas to steal.

But Jesus is quick to respond: "Leave her alone!

"She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Now let's be clear: Jesus and his friends are not noted for their extravagant lifestyle.

Jesus' devotion to the poor, the diseased and disabled is clear throughout the gospels.

But here he accepts Mary's anointing and affirms it, despite the cost.

Yes, the money could have been used to help the poor,

but he accepts this gracious offering for what it is: A gift.

An acknowledgment that time among friends is short.

An anticipatory glimmer, perhaps, of his kneeling to wash the feet of the disciples a few days later.

An anticipatory preparation of his body for burial.

A prayerful hope, perhaps, by Mary that Jesus' ministry will somehow continue, despite what is to come, and that the communities forming in his name will indeed name him Messiah, the Christ, the one who fulfills God's promise and welcomes the world into a new relationship with God.

Jesus does three things in this portion of the story: He rebukes Judas. He affirms Mary's actions. And he says, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Most peculiar....

Yet these words of Jesus appear in three anointing stories in the gospels. In other words, they are an important part of the tradition around Jesus and his ministry. Yet they form one of the most misquoted and misunderstood sentences in the Bible.

It's used by conservatives to blame the poor for being poor ... and thus justify ignoring their needs. It's used by legislators to curtail food programs for hungry children. It's even used by people suffering from compassion fatigue, worn out by endless streams of needy people, coming to their agency or shelter or soup kitchen, asking for help.

But Jesus is an itinerant preacher who knows his Torah. His rebuke of Judas is lifted from a well-known part of his tradition. He says only part of it out loud. He doesn't need to say the rest. The disciples know what comes next – and John's congregation does too.

It comes from Deuteronomy 15, the place where the ancestors laid out God's vision for a just society with a just economy and a way to periodically rebalance the economic playing field. It's called the Jubilee.

Every seven years, debts would be cancelled. Those who became so indebted that they lost their land ... or a family member had to be handed over as a slave till the debt was satisfied ... all these folks would be released from bondage...

- It was like being released from captivity to your student loan company!
- It's as if a sheriff's deputy is on the way to carry out an eviction – and the orders to remove the family from their home suddenly blow away in a spring breeze.
- Or if a bus carrying dozens of deportees were to break down on the outskirts of Tucson ... and the driver simply opens the door and tells the detainees to go back home to their families...

It's an ancient form of allowing the indebted and vulnerable to start over. And it must have felt like a miracle!

So let's be clear: Jesus is not saying the poor are always with us, so there's nothing we can do. He's not saying alms are enough. Give them a pittance so they'll go away.

He's referencing the very foundation of the Jewish faith, the covenant between God and Israel as it came into a new land after the Exodus, Israel's own release from slavery.

To early Israel, God's love is extravagant. And God calls them to remember their own redemption – and be an extravagant people. God said: Set up your society in this land I have given you, so that people will have enough. But if things get out of whack from time to time, here's a way to set things straight. God says (and this is what Jesus was referring to):

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.”
(Deut 15:10a-11)

The phrase “Open your hand...” is an interesting one. Deuteronomy was written long before little black books were invented. Instead, creditors walked around in robes filled with fragments of hardened clay, on which they kept track of their financial dealings.

Deuteronomy paints a clear picture for us. During the Jubilee, the rich – those who have benefitted from the calamities of their neighbors – are to take those clay tablets out of their robes and drop them to the ground, where they will shatter and return – invisibly – to the dust of the Palestinian desert.

This, however, is only part of the equation. It's really just the backup plan. Plan A is that the structures and systems of the society are to be just. In the ideal, there would be no need for a Jubilee, for the commitment to distributive justice would mean everyone would have enough – enough land to grow food, enough food to sustain life, decent housing for an extended household and all that it entailed. People would not become numbers on a piece of clay in a rich man's robe. The social structures should keep this from happening.

But alas, the commitment faltered and the systems failed. We know this because a huge chunk of the Hebrew Bible is devoted to the writings of the Prophets – those who spoke for God when the ideal of a society based on structural justice had deteriorated into a society of structured injustice.

These were times of vast income inequality, political corruption, the rise and fall of nations, including their own. The systems for distributive justice were no more.

Israel's founding vision fell apart. It happened in many other societies too, including this one. Thus the need for prophets. Thus the need for structural change.

Last Tuesday was Equal Pay Day. Did you catch this in the news? Yet again, we didn't come out very well as a nation. So let's imagine what it would be like if this country really did begin to tax income over \$50 million. (I'm guessing this would not be a problem for many of us....)

Even at a measly 2%, according to one of the presidential hopefuls, this would bring in enough money that women could have access to free and high quality childcare and thus could get better jobs and wouldn't have to work till April 2, 2019 in order to earn as much as their male counterparts did by the end of December 2018.

And more specifically, Black women wouldn't have to work till August 22.

And Latina and Indigenous women wouldn't have to work till late September...

That's what a modern day Jubilee might look like!

Jesus preached that kind of vision.

And communities – feeling he was the long-awaited Messiah – came together to shape their common life around that vision.

We are one of those communities.

We know what happened after Jesus and his entourage left Bethany and went on to Jerusalem.

As in the other gospels, Jesus and the disciples gathered for what turned out to be their last evening together. But in John's gospel, Jesus did not institute the Lord's Supper.

Instead, he washed his disciples' feet and gave them a new commandment: to love one another.

“Just as I have loved you [Jesus said], you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples....” (John 3:4b-5a)

Then Jesus is tried, crucified and buried. It is Passover.

And this is John's message to his community and to ours.

Jesus represents a new Passover, a new beginning.

Jesus is God's new way of being present among humans.

To remember him – as we do when we celebrate the Lord's Supper –

is to remember not only his life and teachings, or even his death and resurrection.

It is to remember his love....

To remember his words at Bethany.

And to open our hands in love and justice

as we too are raised to new life in him.

Amen.