

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 21, 2010 (V Lent, Year C)

Judas has a point. Why wasn't the money given to the poor? Why wasn't the money spent on expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet given to those in need? John's quick to tell us that Judas had an ulterior motive; that his concern was for lining his own pocket rather than helping the downtrodden. But still; Judas has a point.

And it's a point that can make us all a bit uncomfortable. When we purchase our own luxury items – be that perfume or a dinner out or a new car or a vacation home -- we're making a choice. We are choosing to use our resources in a particular way even though there are many other possible ways to spend that money. It could be invested; it could be put into a college fund; it could be spent on season tickets to the Red Sox. But it could also be given away – to the church, to a local food pantry, to the Boston Symphony. You could argue that you *need* that perfume or dinner out or new car or vacation home. That your very quality of life depends upon it. And it may. But you do have a choice.

Now at this point this sermon could go in one of two directions. I could encourage you to make different choices by giving more money to the poor. That would be a good solid message of gospel-based economic justice. It would take some folks out of their comfort zones since, in my experience, no one really likes to hear me telling them how to spend their money. Though I have been known to do just that.

Or I could reiterate Jesus' statement that we will always have the poor among us. Which is a convenient rationalization for doing nothing on their behalf. "Well, there will always be poor people but the deal on this flat screen TV won't last forever." So we could do guilt or we could do rationalization. I could either try to guilt you into giving away more of your money or rationalize away the need to do so. Perhaps we should put it to a vote.

But in reality, Jesus chooses none of the above. He doesn't set this choice before us. So I'd like to get at this story from another angle. And to do so we have to remember the context of this scene. Jesus will soon be betrayed, arrested, and crucified. His "hour" is near. And it begs the question, "If you knew that your time on this earth was limited, how would you spend your waning days?" Rather than run away and try to avoid his destiny, Jesus is doing what we'd probably all do. He is spending time with the ones he cares most deeply about. He is having a meal among friends – he's at the house of his good buddy Lazarus, the one whose death Jesus wept over before raising him from the dead. Martha's running around as usual; bringing food, clearing plates, and perhaps grumbling under her breath. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, the traditional posture for a rabbinical disciple. Judas is there as are, presumably, at least some of the other disciples.

There's nothing strange about this scene with one exception: Mary is anointing Jesus' feet with the ancient Palestinian equivalent of Chanel Number 5. It's an extravagant, luxurious, exuberant, abundant display of affection. She washes Jesus' feet with her hair and perfume so expensive that it was roughly equivalent to the yearly wages of a day laborer.

This is when Judas pipes up and questions whether this is the best use of the disciples' funds. Let's just say that expensive perfume was not in the annual budget. And, again, he has a point. On one level, Mary's anointing is absurd. You couldn't lavish this amount of costly perfume on anyone for a sustained amount of time. You'd quickly run out of money.

But in the context of the impending crucifixion it is most appropriate. It is a tangible way of expressing human love for the one who would lovingly stretch out his arms on the hard wood of the cross for all of humanity. Jesus uses this scene to foreshadow the anointing of his body at burial, a reference that probably goes well above the heads of those in the room. For Mary there's no foreshadowing; it's simply an extreme act of love for her Lord. And unbeknownst to her the whole scene also foreshadows the Last Supper – the washing of the disciples' feet, Judas' betrayal, and a last meal together.

And so Jesus' words about always having the poor among us do not diminish our responsibility to care for the poor both as individuals and as a community of faith. They do not lessen the gospel imperative to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and care for the sick. Jesus' crucifixion sets in motion the opportunity to continually serve the poor. That need never stops nor does our responsibility to reach out.

Which means the choice isn't between guilt and rationalization; it's between fear and love. It's a choice between standing with Judas and corrupting the vision of Jesus or standing with Mary in embracing the vision of Jesus.

So, yes, we should think carefully about how we spend our money. But we must also think about how we can better lavish love upon our Lord. That means giving extravagantly of ourselves in prayer and worship; in deed and action; in desire and commitment. The opposite of love is not hate; it is fear. Fear of embrace, fear of intimacy, fear of the unknown. If perfect love casts out fear, Mary is doing exactly what she should with that expensive perfume. Lavishing love upon her Lord. And modeling for us the need to do likewise.