

The gospel lesson today is taken from the gospel of St. John, the 12th chapter beginning at the first verse:

*"Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for Him. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those at the table with Him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume but Judas Iscariot, one of the disciples, the one that was about to betray him said "why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common person and used to steal what was put into it. And Jesus said "leave her alone she brought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."*

And here ends the Gospel reading. So this gospel lesson is one of the most misquoted parts scripture that I've ever heard and it's very frustrating so before I talk about what I think the gospel lesson is about, let me say what I think it's not about. What it's not about is that last line-that last line 'the poor will always be with you,' has been used again and again by people saying look we should help the poor, we should try to end poverty, we should make a difference. And someone in the group will say "you know what we could but the poor will always be with you I mean even Jesus said it and look he was right-they're still there. So it's often used as a justification for not serving the poor and if there's one message that you get through reading the gospels it's that Jesus is not simply

concerned about spiritual poverty, which He is, but his talks, again and again, including his first-ever sermon about helping the poor, the needy.

So let me just say, next time you hear someone say "Well we could help the poor but the poor will always be with us," you can say "you're taking that out of context," and you can tell them what the true meaning of this story is. So that's what the story is not about. What is the story about? What is Jesus trying to teach us through this lesson? And the lesson, it's a pretty dramatic story; to get to that I want to look a little bit at the context of what's going on here, paint a little bit of a picture okay, so we can kind of get a better sense of the setting, what's taking place.

So Jesus, just before this story, has raised his friend Lazarus from the dead okay. He is now at dinner in his honor at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus; they're brothers and sisters. You follow me? Mary and Martha, you may recall from other stories, were the ones; one was at Jesus feet and one was cooking in the kitchen and she says "she never helps out" and Jesus says "no it's good to be at my feet. It's good to listen to the lesson.

So that's Mary and Martha, we've heard them before. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is by far His biggest Miracle; it is really big. And Jesus has already pissed off the Roman authorities and the religious establishment and he stayed somewhat outside of Jerusalem. When he raises Lazarus He's coming back in and He's getting close to the centre toward Jerusalem. So He's making his march towards Jerusalem, knowing that he will face humiliation, torture and execution and the betrayal of his friends. And that night, they're all having some wine and

they're sitting down and Lazarus who was dead is laughing and Mary and Martha and everybody was having a great time. And for Jesus, I think what's got to be on his mind is "this is joy; this is great; I'm with friends, the people who love me and I also know what's coming. So this is particularly a special night. We talked about the Last Supper with the disciples but this might be the first Last supper, the last party. So He's celebrating. And then Mary does something really strange, strange by the standards then and strange by today. She breaks out some perfume and she starts massaging His feet, and if it sounds weird, it was then. It would be today. Imagine somebody getting up from a dinner party and saying "Ugh, let me give you a massage," at the party. And imagine it's a girl and it's a guy and people would be like "Hmmm, what's going on here, this is a little weird, this is a little uncomfortable; this is not what happens and certainly not among friends and not at parties. So it's awkward right, it's a little strange and she breaks out this expensive perfume. Experts say that it was in the value of a whole year's salary, so we can kind of value it that way; that's what it cost. She's definitely wasting it, is what the story's pointing at. It's odd, it's special. And so in the midst of all that, Judas, who is the treasurer says what any fiscally responsible person would say I think, right: "Look, the cost benefit, the value, washing feet with this really expensive perfume versus "we can be doing so much good with this. Why waste it?" He's trying to cast a shadow, put a little darkness on the moment. He's a righteous guy I think, in the meeting.

The gospel of John, the writer of John, just so the audience doesn't mess it up, has like a Greek chorus there and tells you "by the way, Judas is stealing money from the treasury." You know, turns to the audience as a narrator "He's a bad guy and he's going to be the one that betrays Jesus very soon so are you with me

on this? Like, Judas is bad." And so Jesus then says of course, "Let her go, let her do what she's doing." And I can't help but think what's on Jesus' mind, I guess it's a dangerous thing to say what was on Jesus' mind but I'm a preacher and this is a sermon so I can guess. I think Jesus is probably thinking "Wow, this is great, this is pure joy, this is pure love and damn it somebody is caring about me for a change. I've done all the miracles, I've done all the blessings, I've done the raising of the dead; I've done all this and I'm the caregiver here and only one person in the whole world gets it;" and it's always this woman Mary, she's done it before and interestingly enough, I talk a lot about women in my sermons but it's always women who lead in compassion in the gospel stories; they're always opposed by men. This is important for people who say that the Bible says women cannot be in leadership roles because they always lead with compassion. It's always the men that argue with them. And here's another example: so she might be the only person in the world that gets it; that Jesus needs some care giving; He needs to be taken care of and He is grateful for that, that somebody gets it. And it's that feeling that we have when somebody gets us. That click when you're in a joyful moment and people are laughing and you're with friends and you're with family and you're with loved ones and somebody gets you and they know how you feel and that's very deep empathy and it's very rare. And Judas says the practical thing about- this could be spent in other ways. And Jesus is challenging that and saying "You have your values, but let me just say there is a value in taking care of each other. There's a value in empathy; there's a value in love. And it's not just about money all the time.

A few years ago I read an article for Stanford Social Innovation Review about the social change movement, where I do a lot of consulting. And when I was

interviewing this group I found out something really interesting: The more exciting and world changing the groups' mission was, the sadder the employees were; completely contrary to what we think right? How could that be, you're going to solve the water crisis, solve the climate change crisis, solve the refugee crisis, whatever they're doing, and the people in the organization say "I am treated like you know what here." They ask me to do heroic things. Friday night I'm ready to go home, I've got a special night with my partner, we're going to have dinner, it's exciting and my boss says 'I need you to write this, you got to do one more thing.' "But who's taking care of me?' And the answer is "well if you care about the kids that we're serving,' so there's a lot of guilt, couldn't this be spent on the poor, what happens in organizations. And my point in the article was "we can't change the world and make it sustainable until we operate a sustainable organization where we actually take care of caregivers. And I thought non-profits were bad and then I did consulting for churches. And if you want to meet some the saddest people, the lot of them are ministers in my field and they are just in deep pain because they'll say to the congregation "I need a salary increase or I need a day off" and people are like "but you're a minister, you're called by God to serve the poor, you don't need those things," as if that person can go to the store and say "Don't charge me for the groceries I'm a minister, you know I don't have to operate in the economy here." That person has to pay their rent and so people often resent it and I talk to one church board member at one of these things and he said "This minister is making more money than me, that can't be right; they're working for God they should be making less and I'm not going to support any increase." Who takes care of the caregiver?

This last week in the news, controversial story was something about 'wounded warrior,' a group that helps veterans and the executives of it were fired. It's a pretty straight forward story; CBS news found out that they had spent a lot of money on salaries, on retreats for the employees and though this guy had taken the organization from like ten million dollars to eight hundred million dollars, they basically said "you shouldn't be making that kind of money in overhead if you're in a charity. But I want to look at the other side of that story. A good book by a guy named Dan Pallotta, a friend of mine, called 'Uncharitable,' shows how we have come to the point where we don't value people doing social good enough to reward them and take care of the caregivers. It was a business and it was a start up Tech Company and he held these retreats and he made those salaries we'd say "smart guy, that's a good person doing good things," but because it's in the social change arena, we say "caregivers in that field, you need to suffer. We're not going to care for the caregivers." Another perfect example of this, if you work in the medical field, are nurses, you are kind of like God's hands on the front lines, reaching the people's lives on a daily basis and you talk to them and they are like [00:12:31] from the doctor, not treated with as much respect, so we see this, caregivers often not getting care, and so I think in this story, I think Jesus is saying "Listen, look at Mary, she's being empathetic, she's taking care of me; I appreciate that; you do that with each other, you take care of each other. Money can't buy everything, money can't buy love. We can be empathetic to each other and there's really no value on that, you can't people can't put a price tag on it. But I think when we look at the end of our lives and we reflect back, at least I know when I've talked to people, what's most important in your life; the joy, the laughter, the family, the love; when people

took care of me and I took care of other people. You can't put a price on that but we do need to value the caregiver. I think Jesus is teaching that in this lesson.

We can learn from all the characters in the story as we wrap up. I think from Mary we can learn about being impractical sometimes and just loving. I think from Judas we can learn that it's not what you say it's why you say it; he does not care about the poor but it's a great line and it sounds right. And I think from Jesus we're being taught in this lesson that we have to love those who love and look after each other. Amen

