

Rationalizing our Indifference

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Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, [John 12:1-8](#)

How many people are there whose first reaction to our reading this morning from the Gospel of John is to say, “Ah hah, I knew it”?

The story is about, or at least it appears to be about, the whole question of whether or not we ought to give money and resources to the poor. And I suspect that there are a lot of people out there – and I’m not necessarily talking about people out there in the sanctuary this morning or people watching on zoom, I’m talking about people out there in the world at large – who do not want to see their hard-earned money going to support the poor. They don’t want to see it taken in their taxes and spent on things like welfare. They don’t want to give their money to feed or clothe or otherwise help the poor either. It’s their money; they want to keep it.

The Need for Rationalization

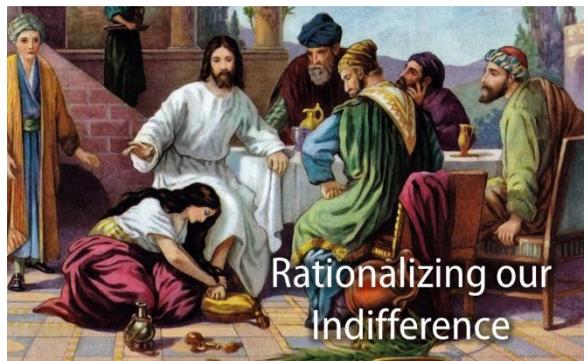
It is not an unusual sentiment, I suspect, but it’s also not really one that very many people want to own. Nobody wants to seem unkind or cheap or cruel towards the poor. And so, they’ve got to find a reason not to give to the poor. They need a rationalization. And our reading this morning from the Gospel of John seems to offer two really extraordinary rationalizations. In fact, I think they are the main ones that people offer. One comes to us from Judas Iscariot. The other one comes from Jesus.

So, let’s take a look at these two very biblical reasons not to give to support the poor. When Mary comes in and begins to lavish this really expensive perfume on Jesus, pouring it out so wantonly that the scent of it fills the entire room, it is Judas it brings up the topic of giving to the poor. **“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”** he cries out to Mary.

Bad Spokesperson

And the first problem with that is obviously the spokesperson. I mean, it doesn’t seem like a very good endorsement to put the suggestion of giving to the poor on the lips of the most vile, hateful and despicable character in the entire book. If Voldemort made the suggestion that everyone should go down to the beach in a Harry Potter book, it wouldn’t make that seem like a very good idea, would it? And if Pennywise the Clown suggested that we all go down and play in the sewers, I don’t think that would be a big endorsement. So, when we hear Judas making this suggestion, it certainly doesn’t make it seem as if giving to the poor is a good thing to do.

But, of course, it is actually even worse than that because we are also told exactly what Judas’



motivations were. **“He said this not because he cared about the poor,”** the gospel writer tells us, **“but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.”** And that has got to be the number one excuse that people offer for why they don’t want to give anything to the poor. They are pretty convinced that there must be some sort of theft involved. And this is where I see such people looking at this passage from the Gospel of John and saying, “Ah hah!”

The Assumption of Theft

This is, of course, an assumption that you run into all the time when you are involved in helping those living on the margins of society. There are always stories or suspicions about people stealing – which is to say about people getting benefits that they are not entitled to or that they don’t use in the ways that we want them to. We run into this sometimes here at St Andrew’s. There have been accusations, from time to time, of people taking more clothes than they can use and then selling them on Kijiji.

Often people make observations concerning the lifestyle of people who come. Maybe they observe that they are driving a car that seems like it’s in good shape or that would have cost too much. They also make comments when people have expensive habits like smoking. So, the argument seems to go, if there are some people who don’t look or act poor enough or they use the resources in ways we don’t like, that is stealing and it invalidates the entire exercise, even if only a small percentage of the people are doing it.

Government Programs have the Same Problem

We also see the same argument being employed on larger scale efforts to alleviate poverty. Welfare programs have often been cut back based on accusations of people using drugs or not wanting to work. In a number of jurisdictions, things like drug testing and rigorous requirements that people be searching for work have been put into place.

Now I am not saying that there should be no restrictions or regulations surrounding people accessing programs. And obviously it is not sufficient simply to provide the monetary support without giving people the tools and assistance they need to move towards supporting themselves. But the fact of the matter is that, when punitive measures have been put into place because of the perception that generosity leads to theft, they have generally failed. Programs, for example, that have required drug testing for people to receive welfare have been an enormous failure. The numbers of positive tests were ridiculously low, and the programs did not save any money, they made the whole program cost a lot more. All of that makes me feel as if this tendency to suggest that programs to help the poor are riddled with theft is not really about a concern for any theft itself, but rather a way of justifying not doing anything.

Second Rationalization

So, that is one rationalization, the accusation of theft, that we should be wary of. The second rationalization is also found in this gospel passage. What’s more, it is actually Jesus who says it this time. **“Leave her alone,”** Jesus says. **“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.”** And I know exactly

how a lot of people will interpret that saying of Jesus. They will understand Jesus to be saying that it is okay that the money was not given to the poor because the problem of poverty is not going to go away. They would take him to mean that we shouldn't give money to help the poor because the problem of poverty is intractable. So, this quickly becomes another excuse not to do anything for poor people and it even seems to have Jesus' endorsement on not doing anything.

But is that really what Jesus is saying? No, he is not. One of the main reasons why we can know that for sure is because this saying does not have its origins with Jesus. What Jesus is doing here is quoting from an Old Testament passage. The passage is found in the Book of Deuteronomy 15:11 where Moses says, **"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 neighbour in your land.'"**

The Context in Deuteronomy

When Jews did that kind of thing, when they quoted one line from their scriptures, they did it with the expectation that their fellow Jewish listeners or readers would recognize the quote and go back and read it within its larger context. So, when he quotes this passage, Jesus does not expect the disciples to take that quote alone but rather to go back and see what it was that Moses was talking about around that.

That passage in the Book of Deuteronomy is a description of a specific law in Ancient Israel known as the Sabbath Year law. It describes a series of measures that were to be taken every seven years. These measures included things like canceling debts and giving freedom to those who had been sold into slavery because of their debts. The Sabbath Year law was a series of measures, in other words, that were intended to address the *systemic* problems in society and in the economy that tended to push people into a state of permanent poverty that they could not find their way out of.

Addressing Systemic Problems

There is evidence to indicate that this law and others measures like it were very active in the popular imagination in Jesus' time. They were popular because the people in general were very aware of the kind of systemic issues in society, things like inflation, income inequality and the structure of taxation that had made it quite impossible for large portions of the population to escape from endless cycles of poverty. So, essentially what Jesus was doing by directing his disciples' attention towards this law was saying something very important about how we ought to address the problem of poverty.

Jesus was pointing out that there is a problem with focusing only on giving money or doing things like running food banks and giving away clothing. That kind of charity is obviously essential when people can't feed or clothe their children, but it doesn't actually solve the problem behind poverty because most of that problem comes down to the system, the way that society is set up and the economic and political policies that are in place. The ancient law of the Sabbath Year was an effort to address some of those larger systemic issues.

That is not to say that such a law is a perfect tool to address those issues or that the ancient law would actually work in our modern society and economy. I am pretty sure that it wouldn't work and

would probably make things much worse. But the principal is an important one. It is not enough to just give to the poor without addressing those larger systemic issues.

The Danger in Just Giving

I believe that we are truly blessed in this congregation and in the church in general when we are able to reach out in compassion and support people who are really struggling to get by. It is actually a privilege to be able to have that kind of ministry. But there is a danger that comes with such a ministry; we may fail to look at the bigger picture. If we really cared about the poor, we should be advocating for policies that address the systemic issues in our society. We should be involved in pressing for changes in how people are compensated and respected in their work. We should be involved in addressing income inequality.

And I do realize that some of that is a bit problematic for a church that does not want to become directly involved in partisan politics. We are not in a position where we can endorse a certain party's policies about these things. But none of that should get in the way of us speaking out and informing ourselves as citizens because these really are systemic issues that affect the whole of society. I think it is important for us to understand that Jesus was saying that, as good as giving to the poor is, it is not the whole response that we need to be making.

Changing the Atmosphere

Perhaps a good image for what we need to be doing about poverty would be that woman, Mary, and her jar of expensive perfume. Yes, that perfume was costly, and the money could have been used to support many struggling families. But what did she do with it? I think it's significant that the gospel writer points out something that she did accomplish with that perfume. He tells us that, **"The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."** He notes that she literally changed the atmosphere in that entire house. And I think that that is what we need to aspire to as we address the problem of poverty in our society. There is a need to change the atmosphere.

People will always find excuses and justification for not giving to those who are in need. The accusation of theft is often a handy excuse, but when you look at it closely you recognize that it is mostly based on misrepresentation. The excuse that poverty is an intractable problem and that meeting the needs of one poor person will not fix the systemic issues is definitely one that requires more thought on our part. If we really want to pay attention to what Jesus is saying in this passage, I believe that we need to find ways to balance the need to respond to immediate problems with the imperative of addressing the larger issues in our society and the way it is structured by actually changing the atmosphere and the way that we and others think about how the system needs to work.