

## Isaiah 43:18-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>18</sup> Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
<sup>19</sup> I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.  
<sup>20</sup> The wild animals will honor me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
<sup>21</sup> the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

## Mary Anoints Jesus

**12** Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them<sup>[a]</sup> with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii<sup>[b]</sup> and the money given to the poor?"<sup>6</sup> (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept

the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it<sup>[c]</sup> so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

## **Deuteronomy 15**

<sup>7</sup>If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. <sup>8</sup>You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. <sup>9</sup>Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. <sup>10</sup>Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. <sup>11</sup>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."

**March 13, 2016**

**Isaiah 43: 18-21; John 12: 1-8; Deuteronomy 15: 7-11**

**Judas Verses the Poor**

**Kerra Becker English**

I love this reading from John's gospel. The interaction between Mary and Jesus is sensual and vulnerable. It shows a kind of naked spirituality that we don't witness all that often. I long to stay there and extend my time with the two of them, entwined in her expression of loving gratitude and his expression of the preciousness of life than can only be found in knowing it's finite nature. It's glorious. It's real, and it ends way too abruptly.

This moment of grace gets interrupted, harshly, by Judas who cannot bear to watch what's happening in this scene. The perfume, the expensive perfume is being wasted. The smell that was gracing everyone else in the room was sickening to him. He was wickedly jealous. Mary, this WOMAN, was receiving far more attention than he ever got as a disciple. He was envious of her closeness to the Master, but he also coveted her wealth. Why did SHE have this costly perfume? Didn't she know what Jewish law commanded she do with it? And Judas was greedy. He actually wanted the money for his own purposes, not really for the poor. Jesus knew what was being said, even if his words claimed something different. He wanted to sell the perfume; that was correct. However, he wanted it for his own causes and interests. He had been stealing from the common purse now for some time.

Judas was an absolute mess. He was arrogant, power hungry, greedy, and rude. He was a thief and a liar, and it wouldn't take long before he would become a betrayer as well. Why did Jesus, knowing all this, keep him around, and allow him full access to his inner circle? There

even seems to be some sense in which Jesus loves him. He is betrayed with a kiss after all! Jesus loves the broken man Judas who cannot keep from comparing himself to others, who wants to act morally superior and always be the favorite. He loves the man who is willing to lie, cheat, and steal to get where he wants to be. Honestly, I don't know what Jesus could possibly see in him.

And yet, when I take the cold, hard look at myself, I suspect that Jesus also finds some similar parts of me that are hard to love. I long to be at Jesus' feet with Mary, but that takes such a huge emotional risk. I'm probably more likely to find myself standing pitifully outside that circle like Judas and wondering why Jesus loves her more. He was, after all, the upright Jew maybe even the most learned of the bunch. He knew his scripture, the one he was paraphrasing from Deuteronomy when he used it as a sword to wield against Jesus in this moment.

He was hurt, and felt excluded, so he lashed out in the only way he knew how. He attacked his rabbi with scripture. "Why wasn't this perfume sold, and the money given to the poor?" It seems to come out of nowhere, but that's not true. It comes from somewhere important. It bubbles up from Judas' strictly Jewish upbringing, one he thought his Master would understand. Here's what Judas was really saying. He was harkening back to the instruction given in Deuteronomy 15 where it says,

*"If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake."*

Judas wasn't wrong. There was a moral imperative in his religious upbringing that said - if anyone among you is in need, it is your obligation to cheerfully and generously offer help. But that's not what was going on here. Judas' emotional wounds betray him. He has the right idea, but he doesn't even plan to fulfill it. He didn't really want the money for the poor, but he didn't want it to be used in this way either. He was objecting viscerally to the whole scenario, the vulnerability of both Mary and Jesus frightened him in such a way that he had to interrupt it, confront it, and somehow turn the attention only to himself.

So Jesus responds in a way that often gets terribly twisted in the re-telling. He speaks to Judas quite lovingly really, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Too often, this is used as an excuse for NOT helping the poor. But if you know the scripture from Deuteronomy, and can see it in your mind as you look at this text, you can't un-see it. (Thank you Fred Clark for your blog post) You see, Judas is calling Jesus to his moral obligation as a Jew. You are **REQUIRED** to do this for the poor. But Jesus interpreted the very next verse from Deuteronomy to make his answer. He knew the scripture, maybe even better than Judas did. The next line says, "*Since there will never cease to be some need on the earth, I therefore command you, Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.*" The poor you will always have with you. Jesus is NOT advocating the abdication of this command to help the poor, not in the least. There will always be need. Meet the need. But in this particular instance, he was claiming his own finitude - that he **WOULD** cease to be on this earth. There will always be need, but there won't always be me. He would not cheapen the blessing he received from Mary. It was her call to anoint him with her perfume and her compassion so he would be prepared what was yet to come.

It can be quite helpful to have someone point out these textual connections. The Bible is a very large book, and remembering the context is important. If you have a study Bible, you might find a reference like this in the footnotes, or in a commentary, or come across it reading links on the internet. It reminds us that quoting scripture is a dangerous business, and that a wounded soul will likely use scripture for his or her own purposes, most of them about their own guilt or shame. Judas was playing out a huge shame script. This interruption has little to do with our real response to poverty, and yet it might have everything to do with how the poor are treated as our own personal scapegoats.

In this political cycle, remembering Judas' reaction, pay close attention to what gets said about "the poor." Do we always have them with us? Are we responsible for meeting their needs, or do we tell them that it's their own fault for being poor? Do we ignore them altogether? Do we address extravagance that could be used for this kind of attention to the community's good as a whole? Do we open-handed, and liberally give to needs of various sorts – whether it's a practical need or an emotional one? Since there will never cease to be some sort of need on this earth – what is it that we will do about that need? I don't have the right answers for all this, and I suspect that the politicians are even more uncomfortable than I am in addressing it. National and global needs are not easily solved – but personally addressing community needs may be exactly the kind of work we are called to do. This text in Deuteronomy makes it about our neighbors, the people that we would recognize walking down the street, the members of our families and churches, the ones who live in the same communities as we do, even if they make their home in a hotel alongside of I-95. So as God really does command in Deuteronomy, "Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor."

But this way that Judas references “the poor” comes out of his own sense of missing out on something – whether it’s the closeness with Jesus or the riches he thinks he deserves for being such an upright and uptight student of the law. It isn’t at all about his genuine concern for the poor! That should keep us vigilant in asking if or how others might be twisting laws for their own purposes, or using “the poor” as a way to deflect from their own lack of self-worth.

And in the same way that Judas struck up a conversation about those poor “other people” to ease his own anxieties, we can easily misconstrue Judas as the evil OTHER. We often do. He has his faults to be sure. And sometimes his faults look a little too much like our own faults. That’s why it’s so easy to hate him. It’s the same things we can hate about ourselves. But I have to remember that Jesus LOVED him and kept him close. It means that Jesus probably also loves our crazy political figures who get anxious when things get real and vulnerable. They have such images to protect, and Jesus knows that. So I believe that Jesus loves Donald Trump. And Jesus loves Hilary Clinton, and Ted Cruz, and Bernie Sanders, and Marco Rubio. I’m not sure he’s helping them develop policy or getting the chance to correct them when they misquote scripture. Nevertheless, I have to believe that he loves the candidates, AND he loves the poor, AND he loves those who are keeping love in their hearts through all the hate we see on TV and read on the Internet.

Judas’ rude interruption in this story is so important for us to understand. Love shared so openly and vulnerably as Mary washing Jesus’ feet with her hair can make us uncomfortable, anxious, and afraid. What is it like to have love like that that forgives and heals our deepest brokenness? It means we might have to open up about our own brokenness, and that’s terrifying. As we as a nation open up such conversations about forgiving and healing our deepest sins, the ones that make America far less than great, and far less than kind, of course there will be

interruptions and blaming and shaming – because it keeps us from dealing with our own stuff. That’s human emotional behavior to deflect and defer our pain rather than let the tears flow freely, rather than pour out our hearts at Jesus’ feet.

So back to the beginning... I want to be at the feet of Jesus with Mary, and be able to stay there without interruption. That’s humanity at its best. But it is so hard to stay there, to wash away the hurt with countless tears, to pour out every ounce of my wealth, every drop of my strength knowing that to others it looks like shame, it looks like weakness, it looks like imperfection. To the outside world, Mary looks like failure, when in reality she is discovering spiritual truth and leaping toward a real understanding of the divine. It is the story of the gospel, right there, forgiveness and restoration in a single act of loving-kindness. Jesus loves Mary completely in this holiest of moments, but I hope you will remember that Jesus also loves Judas when he cannot help himself from interrupting. Amen.