

What About the Poor?

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Ancient Witnesses: Deuteronomy 15:7-11, John 12:1-8

Once a businessman, who was notorious for his ruthlessness, announced to Mark Twain, “Before I die I am going to make a pilgrimage to the holy land. I will climb to the top of Mt. Sinai and read the ten commandments aloud at the top.” “I have a better idea,” said Twain. “You could stay home in Boston and keep them.” Through the years, there have been those who used their humor and wit to expose hypocrisy.

Today I want to focus on this question: How much do we have to give to the poor? How much are we justified in keeping for ourselves when there are so many in desperate need? And can humor, perhaps, help us understand this question?

There are a few different ethical positions. First, the **It’s-Mine-All-Mine Approach**. These folks scoff at the idea that the needs of the poor have any claim whatsoever upon them. “I’ve earned it, or I’ve inherited it. It’s mine.” they say. I don’t know any of these folks personally.

Another is the **Absolutist Approach**. I do know some of these folks, and I admire their faith. They say that nothing short of giving it all away is justified. They have taken personal vows of poverty and live radically simple lives. These gentlefolk are often pacifists, claiming violence of any kind is not justified, including police or jail. They find their inspiration in the example of Jesus, about whom I want to talk in a minute. And the church itself has tried to lure us in this direction at times. Pope Paul VI once wrote: “No one is justified in keeping for one’s exclusive use what one does not need, when others lack necessities.”

Most of us, though, live somewhere in the middle, in a *tension*, between focusing time, resources and energy on the needs of others and on ourselves. In some ways, this third option of **living in a tension** is more difficult than an absolutist one. Each decision requires theological reflection. For example, instead of giving away all my money, I might decide to save some to help my children go to college. I believe this will lower the burden of debt they will have and increase their chances of success. In my faith, I believe that God wants my children to grow and flourish, as well as to be a contributing, positive force in society. One might ask the same kind of questions about owning automobiles, saving for retirement, and so forth. One spring I took my older children on a little vacation in Florida, taking in the beach and Disney World. How could I justify this extravagance in a world of such deprivation and misery? Again, most of us live in a tension, where we internally calculate the importance of the bonding and nurturing of our families, doing things to relieve stress and promote emotional well-being, that enjoyment is an important part of life, and we do not live by bread alone. Part of this tension is knowing that we also have a tendency to rationalize things and deceive ourselves. We balance this with the claims of the poor upon us. This, and the words of Jesus.

I don't know about you, but today's passage has bothered me for years when I was younger. Why? Well, everything seems to be going O.K. until the last verse when Jesus says, "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." This has always been depressing to me because it seems to imply two things: That Jesus could be slightly self-pitying, and that he was, at least momentarily, sick and tired about hearing about the poor. And I don't know about you, but I have found this disturbing.

Much of the Bible has often been misused and abused, as we well know. Jesus himself was great at showing how the Pharisees manipulated the scriptures for their own agenda and aggrandizement, pretending to be ethically pure. But we really don't have to go back that far in our history.

Parts of the church used Paul's exhortations to "treat your slaves well" as an indication that slavery itself was O.K. This was used to justify the inhumane practice of slavery for generations in this nation. And it took a movement for the abolition of slavery to eradicate it from this land.

Today's passage is one of those that has been twisted and maligned through the years. When I was young and we were together with all of the family relation, someone would bring up the plight of the poor, someone respectable, maybe an aunt or and uncle, would say that Jesus himself had given up doing much about the poor, paraphrasing John 12, verse 8: "The poor are hopeless. We'll always be stuck with them." And it was at that point when everyone else was free to say the poor were hopeless because they were so lazy or dumb, that they drank too much or had too many children...

This verse has been used to demonize and ignore the poor and immigrants. We hear this rhetoric in this election season. It's a hopeless problem, they say, and there's nothing we can do about it. But that attitude hasn't always been the case in our nation. In the 1930's, FDR's New Deal legislation made enormous strides. Social Security, for example, is probably the single greatest anti-poverty program that was enacted. And in 1964, President Johnson declared a war on poverty "not only to relieve the symptom of poverty," he said, "but to cure it." And programs such as medicare and medicaid were established. Matthew Desmond, in his recent book, *Poverty, By America*, calls us to build upon these efforts for the abolition of poverty in America. Like the abolitionism of slavery, there would need to be a mass movement. But it is possible! We do not have to simply accept and acquiesce to the presence of poverty in our midst. Wouldn't Jesus want that?

If the Sermon on the Mount is true, how could this verse be taken as proof that Jesus got sick and tired of people who needed mercy all the time? For the Sermon on the Mount suggests a mercifulness that can never waver or fade.

Jesus' example of giving himself away completely, of being a servant even unto death, of totally "emptying" himself until there was nothing left. And Jesus asked the rich young man to give everything he had to the poor. So how are we to understand this response from Jesus: "the poor you shall always have with you."

Kurt Vonnegut once gave a wonderful sermon on this passage. He said that Jesus was only joking, and that he was not really thinking about the poor when he said it. Now, it's not so heretical to think that Jesus used humor. Vonnegut said, "Laughs are exactly as honorable as tears. Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion..."

So here we are. It is the evening before Palm Sunday. Jesus is frustrated and exhausted. His mission on earth is about to come to an end. He suspects that one of his closest associates is going to betray him, and that he is going to die a long, painful death. And yet, the whole Palm Sunday episode is laced with humor. If we read a little further, we would learn that there is a crowd outside, crazy to see Lazarus, not Jesus. Lazarus is the man of the hour as far as the crowd is concerned. And as Vonnegut said, "Trust a crowd to look at the wrong end of a miracle every time." Then there is that Palm Sunday scene itself that someone called "a brilliant satire on pomp and circumstance and high honors in this world." The cheering crowd throwing a welcome suited for a conquering king. Only where are the soldiers? The rolling chariots? Instead, here is peasant riding a donkey! And the crowd doesn't even know that this poor little guy is going to get squashed like a bug.

And so, here are the two sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. And they are at least trying to be helpful by massaging Jesus' feet with an ointment made from the spikenard plant. Judas, trying to be more pious than Jesus says, "Hey, this is not right. Instead of wasting that stuff on your feet, we should have sold it and given the money to the poor." Whereupon Jesus might have said something like, "Judas, don't worry about it. There will still be plenty of poor people left long after I'm gone!" Actually, Jesus' words were said in the Aramaic, and they have come to us through Hebrew and Greek and Latin and archaic English. Perhaps a little something has been lost in the translation. We should remember that in translations jokes are commonly the first things to go. Vonnegut said, "It is impossible to joke in King James English. The funniest joke in the world, if told in King James English, is doomed to sound like Charlton Heston."

This is probably the kind of thing that Mark Twain or Will Rogers or Abraham Lincoln might have said. If this is a little divine humor, then it says nothing much about the poor but everything about pretentiousness. Vonnegut's point was that with one tongue-in-cheek comment we are shown what a long theological exposition could not show us—that Judas' self-serving righteous attitude was ridiculous.

Humor, after all, is an effective way to convey truth. Sometimes a joke can do it like nothing else can. There is a story about Groucho Marx who wanted to join a certain beach club in Santa Monica, California. But he was told by a certain friend that since the club was known to be anti-Semitic, he might as well not bother to apply. "But my wife isn't Jewish," replied Groucho, "so will they let my son go into the water up to his knees?" Now, could anything shed more light and truth on the subject than that?

Of course, Jesus, more than anyone was committed to showing God's love and care for the poor. Some people feel that Jesus was quoting from the Torah—from Deuteronomy: "For the poor will never cease out of this land." And if he was, he would have also been aware of what immediately follows that verse: "Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to

your brother and sister, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.” Of course, the God of Jesus would never abandon the poor, or you or me, for that matter.

But Judas does us all a favor. He helps those of us who honestly struggle with this issue, with the urgent concern for the poor. He helps us to see that even Jesus lived in a certain tension between inner needs and outward concern. In this message we can hear the message that we don't have to save the world all at once, that we can accept our humanity and realize our limitations. Concerns about our own health and vitality might seem a little self-indulgent. It's O.K.

But of course, there's a much bigger story here. Like Jesus' response to self-importance and perfectionism, these words of his are sheer grace.

Thanks be to God!