

## “Contributing to the Poor”

First Presbyterian Church  
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April 7, 2019

**Old Testament Lesson:** Psalm 126

**New Testament Lesson:** John 12:1-8

Dorothy Day was the founder of the Catholic Worker House, which gave rise to the Cherith Brook homeless services that are supported by our church’s Missions Committee and Mission Outreach Small Group.

Day established that first ever Catholic Worker House in 1933 in the slums of New York City. One day, she watched as a wealthy socialite pulled up to the house in a big car. The woman was given a personal tour by Dorothy Day herself. Then, as she was about to leave, the woman impulsively pulled a diamond ring off her finger and handed it to Day. The staff was ecstatic when they heard about this act of generosity. The ring could be sold for a lot of money – enough to fund their ministry for quite a while.

A couple of days later, one of the staff noticed the diamond ring on the finger of a homeless woman who was leaving the mission. Immediately, the staff members confronted Day. Why, in heaven’s name, would she give away a valuable piece of jewelry like that? “That woman was admiring the ring,” said Day. “She thought it was so beautiful. So I gave it to her. Do you think God made diamonds just for the rich?”

Such a debate as this about wealth and poverty is exactly what Jesus is pointing to in today’s New Testament lesson. As we will see, Jesus has a warning of guidance for both the wealthy and the poor, and for all of us in between. Jesus wants us to know how to stay faithful in a world of extreme wealth and poverty, like what we have today in this country.

It’s interesting that this message comes amid Jesus pointing to the cross, when he says, “... You do not always have me,” as if our life – or salvation – depends on what’s happening here in this scripture, which it does. So, what is happening here?

John tells us that six days before the Passover – the Jewish celebration of divine deliverance of salvation, – Jesus is visiting Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead; pointing to the cross. During his visit, Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, anoints Jesus’ feet, and wipes them with her hair. Everyone in the house is basking in the soothing fragrance of the perfume.

But then Judas Iscariot pipes up, saying, “Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?” It’s a good question. Jesus is all about giving to the poor. If we stop right there in the story, we are left wondering the same thing. Why shouldn’t it be given to the poor? Are there good reasons to not give to the poor?

The answer to that has to do with money and the crazy things it does to us. For instance, there was once a guy who always stopped at the pretzel stand outside his workplace, placed \$2 on the counter, but didn’t take a pretzel. One day, the man working the pretzel stand said, “I’ve got something I’d like to say to you.” “Oh, I know,” said the guy, “You want to know why I put down \$2 every day and don’t take a pretzel, don’t you?” “No,” said the vendor. “I just wanted to tell you they’ve gone up to \$2.50.”

It’s just that type of goofy thinking when it comes to money that makes us have to be so careful about giving to the poor. We need to be sure our giving is received in the right spirit.

We see that in today’s story about how Judas approached money and giving to the poor. As we heard, Judas was responsible for the common purse that was used for the needs of Jesus and his disciples, including their charitable giving. John tells us that Judas used to steal what was put into the purse.

Here we have an example of someone collecting for the poor and, instead, taking the money for himself. Now, maybe Judas considered himself to be poor. After all, he and the other disciples did leave their jobs to follow Jesus. But that just shows you how wealth and poverty can mess us up inside, to where we don’t do the right thing, don’t even know for sure what the right thing is in giving to the poor.

No matter how poor or wealthy you might be, I would hope none of us would resort to a life of stealing like Judas did, but that does happen to people. We know that some people who are poor -and rich- steal, abuse the system, refuse to even try to do what’s right.

When it comes to the poor, it’s incredibly hard to know what to do in that instance, as someone who could help, but who doesn’t want to perpetuate a bad situation built on bad habits. At that point, we need to search our hearts for the right thing to do. At that point – when we’re not sure whether to give or not – it becomes as much about us as it is about the person asking for money.

If it’s clear that the person is abusing the system or perpetuating bad habits, then it may be best to direct him or her to an agency equipped to handle such situations, such as the Community Services League.

However, if you're not overwhelmingly convinced about that – if there's significant doubt – then it may be best to error on the side of giving. There are two reasons for this. First, it would damage you spiritually to withhold what you could otherwise give just because you're not sure. Secondly, once we do give to the poor, we have faith that God will find a way to use that act of charity toward God's glory, even if it's just the good and godly feeling we get from giving to someone in need.

For instance, Mary – in today's scripture reading – used her wealth in an act of charity toward Jesus. Something in her heart told her to buy that perfume “so that,” as Jesus says, “she might keep it for the day of (his) burial.” In that instance, Mary knew she was doing the right thing, even if it wasn't apparent to Judas or anyone else.

Mary is an example of using our wealth – whatever money we may have – in service of the Lord. Just as those who are poor need to ensure they use whatever time, talent and money they have toward God's glory, so too, must those who are wealthy, like Mary.

The problem comes when either the poor or the wealthy fall short of putting God before money, which sadly, happens way too much these days. When that happens, both the poor and the wealthy suffer from greed and corruption.

Of course, the struggle of wealth and poverty also effects those in between, people like us who are neither very poor nor very wealthy. For us, there's the danger of becoming cynical, hard-hearted, and overly critical of both those with great wealth and those in poverty.

To find our way safely through that danger we have to take each person on a case-by-case basis. Broad generalizations about rich people and poor people are just not helpful; they're hurtful, for us and everyone else.

The truth is there are people with great wealth using it toward the glory of God and people of severe poverty giving even what little they have, even in the most hopeless situations. Those are the people we need to build up in this country, as opposed to those who are abusing the system, both rich and poor, privileged and downtrodden.

Again, this story, taken from the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry, is all about our salvation, our spiritual wellbeing. Jesus is heading toward the cross, and all the while, he's thinking about us. And not just our eternal salvation, but our life here and now, and particularly how we deal with wealth and poverty, how we contribute to the poor. Do we contribute to the poor financially as we are able, and as we are led by the Holy Spirit?

Or do we contribute to poverty, do we make poverty possible – inevitable – by how we as a people manage and promote wealth in this country. As individuals we have the choice to either support or denounce those who abuse their wealth at the expense of the poor.

Whether you are poor or wealthy or somewhere in between, everyone has the power to use what we have to the glory of God. If we do that – and hold others accountable for using what they have to God’s glory – than all the world is assured of salvation, and all people are assured, of spiritual and material wellbeing. Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Holy God, your grace is a mystery that is incomprehensible to us. It draws us to you, inviting us into your presence. It allows us to experience your delight in us, and helps us to trust your love which we do not deserve.

It’s only by your grace that we dare to hope for eternal life with you, and heaven on earth as it is above.

Thank you for this vast mystery. Thank you for grace that amazes, convicts, invites and consoles.

We ask your blessing upon those suffering from illness and disease, and for those who care for them. Comfort them and give them your peace, even amid the hardest times imaginable.

And for us, Lord, help us to be mindful of all your blessings throughout our lives, and to let our lives sing out as our grateful response for your extravagant gift of love, care, compassion, and blessing.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**