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OMC

From Scarcity to Abundance:

John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4a-11

Good Morning Everyone,

Every time I come across our morning's Gospel text, I find myself struggling with it. We have Mary generously pouring out a precious oil in an act of anointment and Judas then scolding her for the misuse of resources. Then Jesus steps in and assures Judas that what Mary has done is right and good. I have heard various explanations about why Judas is wrong to criticize Mary, and have studied exactly why Judas' view is supposedly selfish and Mary's action is beautiful, even prophetic. But whenever I come to actually read this story, I find myself echoing Judas' sentiments almost word for word. I am so stuck in my values of simplicity, and my raising on frugality and the pride I take in thrifting, it feels absolutely ludicrous when I picture someone pouring out a year's worth of wages on someone's feet. My inner dialogue goes something like this:

“A YEARS WAGES???? Why would you even have something valued at a *year's wages!* That's like a \$40,000 perfume in today's world. And she is just pouring it out! This is a ridiculous waste of resources!! And all these disciples have left everything they had and just followed Jesus and now we are just dumping this ON THE GROUND!”

I don't have much of a poker face to begin with, but I can't even imagine the look I'd give if I was in the room when someone poured out a perfume worth that much money onto the feet of a man who is constantly calling us to care for the poor. And once I get really worked up thinking about this, I have a hard time even making sense of Jesus' response: “**She did this in preparation for my burial. You have poor people with you always. But you won't always have me.**” I mean, sure we want to honor Jesus, but this is the guy who eats kernels of grain from the field, the same guy who told us if we had two coats, we were to give the second one away to the poor. I feel like a cheaper anointing oil would have worked just fine for the simplicity-oriented Rabbi who cares not for worldly riches.

I know that Jesus came and subverted everybody's way of thinking, about devotion, religious traditions, social constructs, and our understanding of power and might. And normally this is one of the things I love most about Jesus, the way he turns everything on its head and scrambles everybody's expectations... but it turns out that I do not react with quiet contemplation when my understanding of *Jesus* gets turned on its head. I want to quote Jesus' lessons back to him and get in an argument about being a good steward of resources. But that tactic got me nowhere closer to understanding, so I turned to our morning's focus statement for some guidance:

As we seek God's way, we move from the fear that there is not enough, to the freedom of living within God's abundance.

And this focus statement helped me find a way into Jesus' teaching in this moment. You see, Jesus doesn't scold Judas for his pragmatism, or engage in an argument over what is the best use of the oil. Jesus' response is to protect Mary from this harsh criticism. To invite Judas into a broader perspective on God's love. Judas is stuck in a scarcity mindset, 'if you do this action, you can't give it to the poor.' But Jesus operates from a stance of abundance. His response is kind but pointed, 'do not worry, Mary had a purpose behind her action, and you still have much to offer the poor around you – the opportunity to help them has not gone away.'

It is so easy to slip into a scarcity mindset, that sometimes I don't even realize I've done it. Like Judas, I was trying to control and calculate the best, most effective use of a finite resource. I was caught up in the story, in following the instructions and doing the 'right' thing. Paul's letter in Philippians highlights this same error in understanding. He is trying to get the community to let go of the fixation on doing everything correctly, and instead consider the welcoming light of Christ that has enough room for all. Paul points out that if anyone should want the rule following way to add up to holiness it would be him, because he followed all those rules to a tee.

But these rules were never the end goal, they were traditions that pointed us towards God. And using them to measure other people by is a perversion of their intended function in our lives. Paul wants to call the community's attention back to the mission of love that Jesus brings into the world, and remind them that this is the centre of our lives, not the systems we have built around it. In our Gospel text we are being challenged to see past the guiding values of our faith, and witness acts of goodness and generosity that are not playing a game of human calculating.

Following Jesus isn't about discovering the right formula of actions and criticizing others when they don't measure up to our efficient standards. It's easy to get so wrapped up in our values of simplicity, stewardship, or charity, that we make them idols in themselves, and it feels sacrilegious when they are not rigidly followed. This is a similar reaction in the Philippians community when the practices of circumcision and other traditional ways of life were not seen as a requirement. That's not to say these actions are not good and beautiful in themselves, its just that when they become the focus of our faith, we've missed the point.

When I get dragged into this inner debate of what is the best way to follow Jesus' teachings, it takes us away from the incredible example of Mary. Mary reveals a clear understanding of what is about to unfold, **“she did this in preparation for my burial.”** Mary knows that Jesus is going to die, to give up everything for the sake of humankind. And Mary's reaction is to literally lay everything she has at Jesus' feet; her wealth, her tears, her devotion. She follows Jesus' example, she pours out everything in the love of God, just as Jesus gives up everything in an act of love for us.

It's an unreasonable act of generosity, it's illogical and costly and it goes against every strategic guideline I can think of. It's the unfettered love of God at work. It is love in abundance. Mary's devotion of love to Jesus inspires us to let go of all that hinders our freedom to love.

She invites us to kneel at Jesus' feet, placing there our heart's treasures, even our earthly possessions. She invites us to a discipleship marked by the radical actions of loving out of God's abundance. To love like we believe it will never run out. To look at a man who loves with abundance, and lean into a discipleship that pours out our lives before Jesus, saying "here take it all." May we all move towards God's way, generously pouring out our love, not obsessing over the best way to do every task, but living in the freedom that comes with God's abundance. Amen.

Sources: New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Believers Bible Commentary, Leader Lenten Resource

Benediction: (*Lenten Leader Resource*)

From this time and place into whatever awaits,
may you follow God's way of abundance.
May you recognize messages of scarcity as lies and
open your eyes to the abundant life of God in this world
As you go, know that our God of the wilderness
remains with you on the way.
Amen.