

Choosing the Second Mile

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (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.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. 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."

Poor Judas. I think he gets a bum rap this morning. If you had a Bible in front of you, you'd see that there are two parts of the Scripture in parentheses. The first statement clarifies that Judas was (the one about to betray Jesus.) The second says that (he didn't care about the poor, he was a thief who stole from the common purse). Nowhere else in the entire Bible does anyone say anything about Judas being a thief. Sure, we know that in a few weeks Judas will reveal himself to make one of the greatest betrayals in history, but I don't think he was actually a thief.

This is one of those few stories that appears in all four gospels. In Matthew and Mark, we don't know the name of the woman who does the anointing. But we do know that it's not Judas who has a problem with her extravagance. It's a large group, either of disciples or of the crowd. It's not one person who raises concern over wastefulness. Then in Luke, no one questions the wastefulness. Instead, for Luke, this is a story about Jesus allowing a sinner to treat him this way. Jesus teaches about the value of forgiveness instead of the value of the perfume.

This makes me wonder about the validity of those parenthetical statements. It seems to me that in writing his gospel, John is trying to foreshadow what Judas is about to do. You know when you watch a movie and you can tell who's a good guy and who's a bad guy by the music played in the background? I wonder if John is writing in some hints to let us know who the bad guy will turn out to be.

And in this story, I feel bad for Judas. Not only does he get called a thief, but Jesus reprimands him for making what sounds like a reasonable suggestion. Mary just used up a bottle of perfume that cost 300 denarii. One denarii was a day's wage. So that would be the equivalent of spending over \$15,000 on perfume today. I identify with Judas when he asks, "Was that really the best use for that money? How many people could we have fed? Or clothed? Or housed?"

And then Jesus gives us kind of a cryptic response. He says, "Leave her alone. 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." First of all, she didn't keep it for the day of his burial. She used it up today. But more importantly, what do you mean we will always have the poor? Poverty is a systemic problem that is nearly impossible to ever solve. But does that mean we shouldn't even try?

I don't think Jesus is saying that at all. One look at his life reveals how much he was willing to do to help those who were stuck in cycles of poverty. I think rather than giving up here, saying that it's futile to try to bring an end to poverty, Jesus is freeing us from the power of economic systems. Jesus is saying, "Don't worry if you can't fix everything. Do what you can. Helping the poor – helping the least, the last, the lost – that should be a priority. But as long as there are those who put self before others and who value money over God, poverty will continue to be a reality."

If that's the case, we have a choice. We could put every resource we have into eliminating poverty – knowing full well that we can at best make a dent in a system more powerful than us. Or, we can tackle poverty with a degree of realism, diverting some of our resources to other worthy ministries. And I think in this story, Jesus is giving us permission to make some choices about how we spend our ministry dollars.

Last week, we talked about our connectional giving, also called apportionments. Apportionments are how each person, each church, each conference gives a fair share in order that we can do more together than we can do apart. In the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, the book containing our denomination's laws, structures and beliefs, we read this about apportionments: "Payment in full of these apportionments by local churches and annual conferences is the first benevolent responsibility of the Church."

In other words, when we consider how to use our funds to reach out in ministry, our first check should be written to apportionments. That's considered first-mile giving. Although not every church pays their apportionments, that is the expectation. One reason some churches don't pay their apportionments in full is that they don't like being told what to do with their money. This feels to them like a tax. They have to pay, and they have no say in how that money will be spent.

And in some ways, that's true. The average church-goer has very little direct input in how the global or conference budgets are put together. We sort of have to trust our brothers and sisters who are responsible for developing those budgets. We contribute our financial resources to denominational priorities. But if we have paid our apportionments, and we have further funding available, then we can consider what our personal priorities are for further giving. This is called second-mile giving, because it goes above and beyond what we are expected to do.

Surveys tell us that more and more, people really like to be specific about donating their money to specific causes. And that's why the Advance for Christ and His Church was created as a program in 1948. It currently has 1,000 projects in over 100 countries. These projects are broad in scope and minister to a variety of needs. Some of these projects are big-name programs you

have heard of: UMCOR disaster relief, Heifer International, and the Souper Bowl of Caring are three this congregation has supported recently.

As part of the Advance, there are also six Special Giving Sundays. These include United Methodist Student Day, Peace With Justice Sunday and One Great Hour of Sharing. On each of these Sundays, you find a special envelope inserted in your bulletin. It has more information about a special program within The United Methodist Church. All the money received for these programs is forwarded on to the Conference Office for distribution. In fact, all money given to any Advance project – 100% of it – goes directly to that project.

Those of you who are really attentive to detail may have noticed that we have missed some of those Special Sundays this year. These six programs were initially selected because they have broad appeal but also raise awareness of certain issues. But the denomination has experienced a drop in the amount of money received on these Sundays, so they are currently running a pilot program to see if people will respond better to fewer, more concentrated special giving Sundays. Our congregation is part of this pilot program. So rather than having six Sundays, we will have two. One, today, is dedicated just to One Great Hour of Sharing. The other Sunday, which we will celebrate in October, will bring the remaining five programs together for one larger offering.

For me, one of the fun things about The Advance program is flipping through their catalog. It's published every four years, and it gives you a chance to see what a variety of amazing ministry is being done around the world. If you have a passion for working with young people, you can support the Congo East Annual Youth Conference, or perhaps the Adolescent HIV/AIDS Prevention Program of Methodist High School in India. If you have a passion for education, you might support the Bengali Girls' Day School or the National Educational Project

in Bolivia. There are ministries to improve health, to educate and support clergy, to assist farmers, to create fair working conditions... the list goes on and on. And if that's not enough for you, the Wisconsin Conference also publishes a smaller catalog of Advance projects that are supported at the Conference level.

In Matthew, Jesus says, "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." He was not talking about apportionments or the Advance program. But I am. The conference doesn't force us to go one mile, but they do expect it. It is up to us, then, to choose to also go the second mile. To give not only because it is required, but because it fulfills our need to give back. Because as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, "Each of [us] must give as [we] have made up [our] mind[s], not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

My grandfather turned 91 years old this week. Do you know how hard it is to buy him a birthday present? He has everything he needs, and a bunch of stuff he doesn't. He doesn't want anything else. He claims to not even buy green bananas anymore, because they're too much of an investment. So Larson and I have taken to making donations in his name to various Advance projects we think he would find interesting. My grandfather would love to support these projects, but he's on a limited income. So it's a win-win situation for everyone. For me, going the extra mile isn't a chore. It's a privilege and an adventure. Amen and amen.