



## **“Always”**

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### **Scripture (NRSV):**

#### **John 12:1-8**

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 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.

4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (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.)

7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

### **Sermon:**

I have shared with you, on more than one occasion, that translating from the ancient texts of our sacred scripture can be a tricky proposition.

Let me share another instance of tricky translation troubles: the context of the word “always”.

The translation says, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

But as Lindsey Trozzo from Princeton seminary points out in her exegesis of this text, “always” can have more than one meaning in the form of the Greek, in which this sentence was written.

This sentence could be taken as a command from Jesus, not a statement of the status quo. It literally could mean, “Have the poor with you always.” Or, “Keep the poor among you always.”

It could very well be that Jesus was remembering the law, from Deuteronomy 15, “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.’”

But this seems self-evident already. Judas is treasurer of their band and already ponders the care of the poor in their midst...he knows how much the fancy perfume was worth and how much it could have assisted the poor. They knew the law of God.

Because of the inclusive nature of the Jesus band, the poor were with them, and they intimately knew and intimately shared of what they had, through the common purse that Judas was responsible for.

What would our world be like, if Jeff Bezos was on the Amazon warehouse floor with his workers? Would he alter his tax-free status then? Would he finally know and understand and share with the poor who were in his empire?

The richest 5% in America own 72% of all wealth in our land. What might happen if they heard Jesus’ command to keep the poor with them always? The bottom 80% of poor Americans own just 7% of the wealth in our land. How might our society be changed if multi-millionaires and billionaires heard the command of Jesus and the book of Deuteronomy, to keep the poor beside them, and close to them, always? To see and know their plight? To “open their hand” to them in generosity?

Jesus, and the God he serves, were not speaking to make things easy, but to make things new. To end old ways of being that were heartless, and violent, and remake the world, in the design of the Garden of Eden. To be starved and poor, while another feasts, was never a part of God’s good design.

So Jesus may indeed be doing more than stating the facts...he may be commanding us to be one with the poor, and begin to unmake the world of poverty that cripples all humanity.

But there is more to this story than responsibility for justice to the poor.

There is Martha providing a feast to her best friend, Jesus; there is Lazarus, raised from death to life, at home and enjoying his family, his friends, a good meal. Something that, just a short time ago, as he lay sick, and dying...he surely never thought he would do again.

And there is Mary, with her extravagant gift. Let's say it was a \$14,000 bottle of perfume. A poor working persons' salary for a year.

That's still, for most of us at least, a ton of money to spend on a bottle of perfume! Aren't you sitting there thinking, "wow, what I could do with an extra \$14,000!" I sure wouldn't spend it on a friend, on perfume. Maybe fix the bathroom, pay down the credit card, fix the car, buy a car (a used one, but still)! Fix the west tower of the church! Give all the staff a raise!

But a present of exotic and expensive perfume to just pour out? Yeah, no.

But what if you knew? You knew you didn't have time to be sensible any more, you didn't have time to be reasonable, and careful with your money.

Because the one you would spend it on, won't be there to enjoy it with you? All your vacation savings are for nothing because there will be no vacation time? Your retirement savings mean nothing, for you have only days left.

I think Mary felt that kind of pressure. Jesus had been speaking at length about the coming days of conflict; the verbal sparring with religious and political leaders was getting more intense...yes, she could read the writing on the wall.

Now was the time to show love. Now was the time to pour out her heart's devotion. To show her respect, to honor the one who gave her so much life and hope.

Mary did it. Martha did, too. I don't know what Lazarus did, after coming back to life and health; I imagine, he lived his life overwhelmed with thanksgiving.

I believe each of them showed their love, poured out their heart's devotion.

What is the point of saving your signs of love for some other day? Of hoarding your thanks, your joy, your extravagant gift for another time?

Give generously, now. Share with the poor, now. Show your love to others, now.

God's generosity is broad and wide, all scripture tells us so. We receive all we need to live, we receive life on this verdant green and blue planet, we receive love, and air, both keep us alive!

This we receive, always.

So, what are we waiting for? Where is our thanksgiving? Where is our extravagant outpouring of thanks and affection and devotion?

"Leave her alone", Jesus says. He defends her generosity, her extravagance, because he knows, there is grief mixed with her love. Loss mixed with thanks. How we ache when we lose those we love! We thought we would have them always. We thought we could wait another day to say the words, to show the love, to share the extravagant gift. We thought we would have more time.

We do not.

Only God, the Creator and Sustainer is "always". The rest of us have now.

So, go ahead, be extravagant in your love and devotion. You will meet God, and Jesus, and Mary and Martha, in that act of extravagant devotion.