

**“Risking Relationship”**  
**John 12:1-8**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**March 13, 2016**

I know we’re supposed to not like Judas, but he’s got a really good point. 300 denarii – that’s nearly a year’s worth of wages for a laborer. And Mary wastes it on Jesus’ feet. Don’t get me wrong - I’m sure Jesus is worth it and all, but why not scale it back a little bit – use a generic brand of perfume that will still cut the foot odor and save some cash for more righteous causes? Poor old Judas. I sympathize with him and not just because I got to play his character one time in Jesus Christ superstar which allowed me to wear a leather coat and sunglasses and pretend I was cool. No, I sympathize with Judas because he doesn’t ever get a fair hearing from us. Because he betrayed Jesus one time, we don’t listen to a word he says. Peter slipped up, too, *three* times, and he became the rock on which the church was built. But Judas? Nobody named their kid Judas after that.

I try to close my eyes and imagine Judas’ one statement in this text coming out of the mouth of any of the other disciples. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Imagine Peter saying it or Andrew, or Nathaniel. If any one of *them* had said it, there’d be no parentheses labeling the speaker as “the one who was about to betray him.” There’d be no descriptive clause that says, “He didn’t say this because he cared about the poor. He said it because he was a thief.” There would just be the statement, “why wasn’t this sold and the money given to the poor?” On its own, it’s a statement that most of us could easily agree with. If I proposed to the worship committee that on Maundy Thursday I’d like to spend \$20,000 on a jar of costly perfume to use to wash the feet of our parishioners, I think they’d all be channeling Judas.

It’s hard to see yourself in Judas, or admit to it. Maybe that’s why Matthew and Mark both attribute the comment to some of the disciples instead of pinning it on Judas. We’re more likely to see ourselves in “some of the disciples’ than we are in the words of the betrayer. We’re more willing to admit that we’re like Peter and the other disciples. We may be willing to admit that, like Peter, there are times when we deny our relationship with Jesus. We may be willing to admit that like the disciples, sometimes we miss the forest for the trees. But name ourselves as Judas? The betrayer? The One who speaks the right words, but doesn’t live them? The one who says he loves Jesus but then stabs him in the back? Probably not.

But maybe John is hoping that more of us will see ourselves in Judas. Maybe he’s hoping that more of us will examine the motives of our purist statements, our ideological rigidity which can serve to elevate ourselves above other people even when we’re saying things that have some truth in them. As I’ve heard it said before there’s nothing worse than a liberal fundamentalist. Or as one of my favorite

theologians, Obi Wan Kenobe says to a fallen Anakin Skywalker, “Only the Sith deal in absolutes.”<sup>1</sup>

Judas’ remarks coming toward the end of Lent reminds me of where we started in Lent with the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness. If you remember the story, the devil is a capable theologian. He loves quoting scripture. Just because someone can speak the language doesn’t mean he is using it to speak the truth. It’s not a bad thing to remember during election season and it’s not a bad thing to remember in the church. Just because you can speak the language doesn’t mean you are using it to live the truth.

Maybe that’s the way Judas speaks about “the poor.” Not as individuals he’s called to love but as an undifferentiated mass of people who ought to be the object of the disciples’ charity. Sell the perfume and give the money to “the poor.” He says this while the poor man Jesus is right in front of him. It’s as if Judas believes the poor is an object to be acted on, a thing that exists outside the communion of disciples instead of a part of who they are.

It’s a mistake often made by the church, a mistake we make in our own church, thinking that the poor is a group of people outside of us instead of part of us. Forgetting that not everyone among us is always able to pay our bills. Not realizing that some of us have faced the stress of making ends meet. Some of us have been through evictions, receive food stamps or need them, struggled with unemployment. The poor is not some undifferentiated mass of “other,” it includes Jesus and some of his followers who make up the church.

Jesus, for his part, says “you will always have the poor with you,” a statement that some have taken to mean that we don’t have to worry about fighting poverty or even addressing it. “The Bible says we’ll always have poverty,” some theologians have said, blaming the poor for their own predicament. “Jesus himself said this so we don’t have to worry about it,” they claim. But Jesus, himself is referring to 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.’” The fact of the poor calls forth generosity from the rest of the community.

Stanley Hauerwas argues that “it is not the church’s task to make the poor rich. . . Rich and poor alike are called to serve one another,” he writes, “which means that the hungry are to be fed and the naked clothed. But the church is the church *of the poor*, drawing from the riches discovered by people who must learn to care for one another because *such care is the richness* produced by following Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

“You will always have the poor with you” is not a philosophical statement about poverty, it is a statement about the location of the church – with and among and of the poor. Not a nameless mass. Not an object to be acted upon. But brothers and sisters whose names are recognized, whose stories are known, whose lives are treasured.

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<sup>1</sup> Alas, in crafting this sermon I learned from some of my friends in the Force, that this statement, itself, reflects a kind of thinking in absolutes. <http://scifi.stackexchange.com/questions/8067/if-only-the-sith-deal-in-absolutes-why-does-obi-wan-say-it-that-way>

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas shares this wisdom in reflecting on the similar story from the book of Matthew in *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 2007, p. 216.

Which is what makes Mary the star to follow in this story. She brings her best to care for Jesus. Not just the best perfume, but her best self. And that really is what the poor really need, according to Jesus. The same thing that everyone else needs – relationships of mutual care. Relationships that involve our whole selves our best selves. Where mutual care, in the words of Hauerwas “is the richness produced by following Jesus.”

The trouble for us is that so much about our world strives to prevent us from these kinds of relationships. Our neighborhoods are vestiges of division by race and income. Our churches are the same. Our politics the same. Our customs, practices, cultures all the same. The church that Jesus envisioned can’t be created without intentional efforts to get out of the lanes that are set out for us.

Our church tries to make it easier to get outside those lanes. We participate in the ecumenical Lenten services making it easier to worship and feast across our lanes of race and denomination. We focus on long-term partnerships in El Salvador and the Dakota Presbytery making it easier to cross lines of culture, history, language and division. We organize with BUILD making it easier to meet people across neighborhood, race, religion and background.

But the truth is that no one can do that work *on behalf of* anyone else. Each of us has to decide how much we are willing to risk to get outside of the lanes we find ourselves in. Each of us has to decide whether we are content to just acknowledge the importance of getting to know people different from each of us, or whether we choose to develop relationships with them.

I heard about a Christian who did just that this past week. Her church, one of the newest members of BUILD, decided together that they wanted to get out in the neighborhood near where their wealthy church is located and talk with people on the street. She was resistant and reluctant. “We meet people face-to-face and build relationships that help to re-knit the frayed social fabric of our life” BUILD claims rather audaciously. But the truth is that it’s not easy to take a risk to engage people on the street.

Afraid but willing to risk, she approached a man with what appeared to be his son on York Road in Govans. She struck up a conversation as she had been trained to do and moved quickly to find out that his passion was for his children. They spoke of what it means to be a parent, what it means to suffer and to hope for your children. Thirty minutes later as this first conversation came to a close the man turned to walk away. “Sir,” she said, “thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. I am so grateful for it.” He turned to her. “No, thank your church for being in my neighborhood and for asking me what I think and what I dream for my children.”

Judas made a good point with his words. But Mary sets the pattern for our living. She takes costly perfume that was supposed to be used for the day of Jesus’ burial. She doesn’t wait until his death to lavish it on him. She uses it today while he’s still with her. We’ve got limited time to use our gifts, including the gift of our lives. We’ve got limited time to share who we are and what we have. We’ve got limited time to get out of those lanes, and take the risk of relationship. We’ve got limited time to bring our best to Jesus, not only for his sake, not only for the sake of others, but for our own.