

May the poor be with you.... always

By Dietrich Gruen, Executive Director of Middleton Outreach Ministry

Just the other day, I was preaching an object lesson about the woman who “wasted” a jar of perfume by anointing Jesus with it. Back in Jesus’ day, that jar of perfume could have been sold for “a year’s wages,” with huge net proceeds then used to support the poor. That fundraising idea first came to Judas Iscariot, the treasurer of the original twelve disciples. But he was not so concerned about the poor, who were always in their midst, as he was about raising money. (For the rest of the story, see the Gospel of John 12:1-8 and Mark 14:1-9.)

But when my ministry colleague, Ross, wondered aloud whether I would likewise anoint someone with a bottle of perfume (I had with me my wife’s favorite bottle), I reflexively thought, “How wasteful!”

Oops. It seems I am no different than Judas—missing the point. But my holding up the perfume bottle as an object lesson also makes the point. Join me in pondering the meaning of “the poor” and the “perfume lady.”

I remain curious how perfume, in any era, is worth “a year’s wages.” Either wages were very depressed in Jesus’ day, or the perfume lady was not employed all that many hours. We know ancient high-end perfume was very expensive to make—remember, it was a king who brought Jesus myrrh at his birth! Perhaps that was one large jar of “pure nard.” Then again, maybe Judas could skillfully get inflated prices when hawking donated items for resale.

Still, I think the true worth of perfume is in its symbolic value, as an object lesson: It was the woman’s most precious item, begging the question: What is our most valuable commodity? What would you have trouble parting with? If asked to give “your best,” or give “whatever it takes,” what would “it” be?

My wife’s perfume cost me almost nothing, just two hours’ wages. Rather, “time with” is what Sue most values, as in our recent weekend together at a B & B retreat. Likewise, for you, what gift is like unto this ancient perfume?

When I posed this question last week to an assembly of school children, grades 5-8, one girl suggested her collection of American Girl dolls would qualify, but most other answers revolved around video and computer games. Point made; they got it. Such relatively expensive toys were their jar of perfume.

However, in its original context, the “waste” or “worth” of such precious items triggers a stinging rebuke and timeless lesson from Jesus: “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.” Then comes the oft-quoted, but largely misunderstood saying of Jesus: “The poor you will always have with you.” That proverbial, problematic saying is more accurately translated (in context): “You (disciples of Jesus) will always be among the poor,” adding, “You can help them any time you want.” (That is, followers of Jesus back then were living among the poor and enjoyed natural, lifelong opportunities to befriend and serve them.) “But (as Jesus is going to die within the week) you will not always have me” with you (Mark 14:6-7).

This “beautiful thing” should be retold “wherever the gospel is preached” (Mark 14:9). For those of us who participate in Holy Week, it is only fitting that we now ask ourselves this follow-up question: *Do I have friends among the poor? Are the poor in our church pews?* Or am I more like the woman who found it incredible that we have a food pantry in Middleton, adding: *“Where do you get your poor from? Do you have to bus them in?”*

Obviously, this prospective MOM volunteer had no contact with, much less any friends among, the poor. By contrast, the poor always reach out to people in similar circumstances; so did the first followers of Jesus.

Not so the rest of us. We tend to make “the poor” into demographic studies, objects of welfare, and a problem to be solved. In living our busy, insulated lives, we often approach “the poor” as a service project. We forget that “the poor” have names, families, joys and concerns, with stories to tell. Stories like this poor perfume lady who gave extravagantly, doing “a beautiful thing,” as unto her Lord.

Believing that “the poor are always with you” is also, for many, a statement of futility or resignation, even a cynical excuse for not trying. IF poverty is perpetual and intractable, then nothing we would do, in partnership with Middleton Outreach Ministry for example, could make any positive or lasting difference.

But your partnership does matter. So do your gifts—not so much your leftovers or unsold garage sale items—but your “jars of perfume”! Or whatever you spend on those you love.

Many of you do this already, at Christmas time, giving very appropriate gifts to MOM clients with whom we match you. You give as if they were family, so why not year-round? Why not *relational* giving, such as mentoring and befriending someone who lacks role models, spiritual guidance, financial understanding, emotional or physical resources? “The poor” are those who lack such resources and need your support and mine.

The woman who spent her precious time and perfume on Jesus is a love story that calls upon us to go and do likewise. Let’s all befriend the poor among us, and do so as unto Jesus, whose face we see in the poor.

MOM exists to connect all our neighbors, rich and poor alike, for good. If you need help connecting, contact us at 836-7338, or email us at www.mompop.org. May the poor be with you, always.