

October 22, 2017

The Radical Sayings of Jesus
You Will Always Have the Poor
John 12:1-8

Opening words: Today, I conclude my sermon series called *The Radical Sayings of Jesus*. You know the truth. Most read the Bible selectively. There are certain things we have read countless times. We read them continuously because they comfort us. However, there are other passages in the Bible we have never read because we find them hard to understand or harsh to our ears. It is true of the entire Bible, including the Gospels. We try to ignore certain words from the Master. The truth be told, there are certain things we wish Jesus had never said. They are just too radical. This is the problem: We can't dismiss those words, because they came from Jesus. We must wrestle with them. We must not just understand them, we must apply them to our daily lives. Today's radical saying of Jesus is a fine example. In our scripture reading for today, Jesus tells us we will always have the poor. That is a sad fact. Jesus's words for us today seem harsh.

We are instructed today from the Gospel of John. Written approximately the year AD 85, the author was the disciple John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." His goal was to make the story of Jesus appealing to the Greek way of thinking. Our scripture reading is John 12:1-8. I have called this message, *You Will Always Have the Poor*.

John 12:1-8 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." ⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

The great evangelist Billy Graham (born 1918) once said, "*Make sure of your commitment to Jesus Christ, and seek to follow Him every day. Don't be swayed by the values and goals of this world, but put Christ and His will in everything you do.*" I wholeheartedly agree. If Jesus has a special place in your heart, say, "**Amen!**"

Years ago, I was involved in a pulpit exchange. You know the pulpit exchange. It is held on the third Sunday of January. All the ministers go to another church for one Sunday.

Everyone likes it. The churches like it because they get to meet a new minister. The ministers like it because they can preach something old. I do not remember who came here, but I do remember where I went. I will not tell you the name of the church, but you may have a guess. That church only had one service. The word must have gotten out. It was pulpit exchange Sunday and I was coming. The attendance was a little low. I didn't count heads, but there were maybe forty people. The lay leader worked his way through the order of worship and pointed to me when it was time to preach. I do not want to sound critical, but the crowd didn't seem impressed by my presence. After a word of welcome, I read the scripture and said a prayer. Two minutes into my sermon a man suddenly appeared in the back. He sat next to another man. The newcomer said something to the other man and he sprang to life. Together, they ran out. A minute later they grabbed another man and he ran out. Next, one of them came back and told his wife something. She grabbed a friend and they left. Three nosy people, who no one talked to, got up to see what was happening. In about ten minutes, I lost about half the crowd. I will be honest with you. As I preached, I began to wonder what was happening. Maybe someone had a heart attack. That would explain their sudden exit. Those who were left behind must have wondered too because they keep looking around. I couldn't take it anymore. I shortened my sermon, only sang one verse of the final hymn and sped through the benediction. I wanted to see the emergency. I wanted to help. When I walked to the back of the sanctuary, I looked for the escapees. I walked toward them to see what was happening. When I found the source of the commotion, I was relieved to find the emergency wasn't a person. It was a thing. The toilet was clogged and everyone was looking for the guilty party. On that day, in that unidentified church, they were more interested in the toilet than in Jesus Christ. Have you ever gone to church and missed Jesus? Have you ever gone to church and something became more important than Jesus? Let me say this clearly. In the life of the church there is nothing more important than Jesus. If we don't have Jesus, then we have nothing at all. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Today, we find ourselves in the twelfth chapter of John. It is six days before Passover and Jesus is in Bethany, near Jerusalem. Bethany was the hometown of Lazarus, the one Jesus resurrected. (You can find that story in the previous chapter.) As a way of thanking Jesus, a dinner is held in his honor. Everyone was there, but only three are mentioned. There was Martha, who is serving the crowd. She is as busy as a bee. There was Lazarus. Everyone must have asked him, what do you remember about being dead? There was Mary. Jesus has her complete attention. She is the one who does the unexpected. According to verse 3, without warning, Mary gets up and takes a pint of expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus's feet, wiping it with her hair. The entire house was filled with the sweet smell. Everyone must have reacted in their own way. According to the text, Judas Iscariot, the one who would soon reject Jesus, saw it as a financial waste. Disguising his selfish motive, Judas Iscariot said the perfume should have been sold and the money could have been given to the poor. It was a good point. Some must have agreed with him. However, Jesus didn't. The Master saw Mary's act as a sign of love and devotion. Defending her, Jesus says today's radical words, "You will

always have the poor but you will not always have me". It pains me to say it, but to date Jesus has been right. The poor are still with us, but his earthly ministry is over. If you sadly agree that Jesus was right, that there are still poor people in our world, say, **"Amen!"**

Our world is the home of many poor people. The numbers don't lie. I came across these numbers this week. They came from an organization called FINCA, The World Bank for the Poor. These numbers reminded me, I have a good life. According to them:

There are approximate 7.6 billion people in our world. Three billion in our world live on less than \$2.50 a day. 1.2 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day. 75% of the world's poor are rural.

In developing countries, 60% to 80% of all income is spent on food. In the United States, it is 10%.

Over 800 million people worldwide do not have enough food to eat. Three million children die annually of malnutrition.

Approximately 1.2 billion in our world live without electricity.

40 million children worldwide live without adequate shelter.

700 million in our world lack clean water.

Approximately one billion people entered the twenty-first century unable to read or write.

Jesus wasn't wrong, Jesus was right! There are many poor people in our world. America is not excluded from poverty. Did you know, according to the United States Census, 13.5%, or 43.1 million Americans, live in poverty? Do you know of anyone who lives in poverty? Have you ever experienced poverty first hand? If you agree that Jesus was sadly right, say, **"Amen!"** However, after saying all of this about poverty, the text is not about poverty. The text is about the supremacy of Jesus. Look at the text with me one more time.

Jesus is in Bethany, the hometown of Lazarus, the man Jesus resurrected. A dinner is being held in Jesus's honor. Mary expresses her extravagant love for Jesus by anointing him with expensive perfume. Jesus does not reprimand her for her waste. He applauds her for her priorities. Jesus understood his role in God's plan of salvation for the world. He knew his mission superseded any human need. Jesus didn't say helping the poor was bad. However, he did know it wasn't enough. It is not just true in Jesus's time, it is true in our time. In the life of the church, doing good things isn't good enough. Like Mary, our top priority must be Jesus. Nothing else in the life of the church really matters.

Several weeks ago, I told you I am not a United Methodist by birth. I am a United Methodist by choice. I was raised in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I never really thought much about my Disciples roots until the last few years. A person from a local Disciple congregation joined here and I began to discover something about myself. My Disciples roots have had great influence on my personal theology. There is a simple line from that denomination that holds great value. It goes like this: *No creed but Christ. No book but the Bible.* As an ordained Elder within the United Methodist Church, I hate to admit it, but that is how I feel. That is what I have taught you through these years. Good works aren't good enough. In the life of the church, nothing really matters but Jesus. If we don't have Jesus, if we are not passionate about Jesus, then we have nothing at all. We are not a social action agency, we are the church of Jesus Christ. We must rediscover our passion for him. If you understand and agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"**

Recently, I began to get ready for this year's Charge Conference. It is November 15. You can feel the excitement building. You know Charge Conference. It is the highest administrative body within a United Methodist congregation. It is our annual business meeting. It is not exciting, but several things do happen. My salary is set for next year. Officers are elected. Goals are set and reports are given. Annually, I write a Pastor's Report. This year I called my Pastor's Report, *The Secret to Our Success*. This has been a good year in the life of this church. I will match our number with any United Methodist congregation in this area. While most United Methodist congregations are struggling, we have seen some growth. The secret to our success has nothing to do with me. It has nothing to do with you. It has nothing to do with what we have done or own. The secret to our success is Jesus. I have understood it for a long time. In the life of the church, nothing really matters but Jesus. If we don't have Jesus, if we are not passionate about Jesus, then we have nothing at all. Let me read to you a paragraph from my report.

I am always amazed how easily distracted we are in the life of the church. We are supposed to be developing disciples for Jesus Christ but we are lost in a sea of good works. It is one of the things that makes any appointment challenging. It is not a lack of passion or energy. People are passionate about many things. People are passionate about the next fundraiser. People are passionate about the building. People are passionate about the cleanliness of our church. People are passionate about the happiness of their friends. People are passionate about their opinions and their voice being heard. At the general church level, we are passionate about issues and heritage. Those things really don't matter, if we are not passionate about Jesus. I refuse to be trapped by the good works and understand my role to simply promote Jesus. In the life of the church nothing matters but Jesus.

If you can agree with that paragraph, say, **"Amen!"** Let me end with this story.

A preacher stood in the pulpit of his new church on his very first Sunday. Let's just say it is a United Methodist Church to make it more fun. In my stories all the preachers are handsome 😊. The church was filled to hear their new handsome preacher. For his first sermon in his new church, he selected as his topic the supremacy of Jesus. It was powerfully delivered and well thought out. The message was embraced by the entire congregation. The next week, he decided to preach on the same topic, the supremacy of Jesus. The third week, he once again preached on the supremacy of Jesus. After four weeks on the supremacy of Jesus, the people began to complain. This is a United Methodist congregation, so an emergency Pastor-Parish Committee meeting was called. The chair asked the question everyone wanted to ask, "When are you going to change your topic? People are getting tired of hearing about the supremacy of Jesus. After all, there are so many other important topics. Why don't you preach on one of the many problems facing our church, denomination or world? Doesn't anything matter to you but the supremacy of Jesus?" The new pastor bluntly replied, "No. The only thing that really matters in the life of the church is Jesus. Everything else is secondary. If we don't have Jesus, then we have nothing at all."

Do you remember the words of Billy Graham? He once said, *"Make sure of your commitment to Jesus Christ, and seek to follow Him every day. Don't be swayed by the values and goals of this world, but put Christ and His will in everything you do."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**