

LIKE THOSE WHO DREAM

PSALM 126; JOHN 12:1-8

John attributes that damnable phrase to Jesus at a gathering six days before the Passover in Bethany: “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” Obviously, this phrase is not damnable because Jesus said it, but because of how it has been twisted to absolve individuals of responsibility for helping out neighbors who are not AIG executives.

Every time that the Lectionary gives us this phrase, whether from John or one of the other Gospels, I wince, especially on a Sunday in which Congress begins untangling legislative yarns being spun in both the House of Representatives and the Senate on the subject of health care reform, and yet if we believe that God is sovereign and that the Spirit speaks to the church and the world through Scripture, often as assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary, then we must take heed of what God is saying in John’s Gospel six days before the Passover in Bethany.

The Passover is about remembering, remembering the Exodus from Egypt. Meaning: slavery is in the background of this story, a story that is set in Lazarus’ home. Meaning: since Lazarus has been resurrected recently, resurrection is in the background of this story that has the feel of a Senate Appropriations Committee meeting. Mary, opting to ask for forgiveness rather than permission, chooses to pop open a bottle of “costly perfume made of pure nard” for this special occasion.

At first, it is not clear what is special about this occasion. Is it Lazarus’ resurrection or Jesus’ visit? Both point to Jesus, who points ultimately to God, who created heaven and earth.

Judas bypasses celebration, citing Robert’s Rules of Order and insisting on decency and good order. Mary has cooked a feast (though I am sure that her macaroni and cheese is not as good as Grace Millender’s or her banana pudding as tasty as Margie Harris’). Mary, acting as the Holy Spirit, anoints

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Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair, as Judas does everything within his power to quench the Spirit's work among them.

John introduces Judas Iscariot as one of Jesus' disciples, as "the one who is about to betray him." So we know from the beginning not to trust him. Then, Judas, with all the dignity of a disciple or US Senator, asks a question: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Legitimate question: For years, I have thought that churches should have to justify their non-profit status based on how they spend their money.

Unfortunately, John ignores the question, because Judas is the one who asks it. Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor? John ignores Judas' question, because Judas is a thief. He keeps the common purse and steals what is put into it. So the question behind Judas' question is, "Mary, why are you anointing Jesus' feet instead of mine?"

At this point, Jesus stands up and says, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." If this story were written now, perhaps Mary would speak for herself, and yet, even in John, a woman is the first to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus the Christ (and resurrection is at the heart of the conflict that leads to crucifixion in John's Gospel).

At last, we arrive at that damnable phrase: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me?" Jesus, staring death in the face, declares that his life and work are worth three hundred denarii, which is approximately a year's wages for a laborer.

What if Jesus is being ironic, as ironic as Judas' question (given how it is introduced by John)? Remember that Jesus is poor, and in Matthew's Gospel, when he is asked about giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked and welcoming the stranger, Jesus proclaims, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Implication: Not only is Jesus poor; he is *the* poor.

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Granted, John's Jesus is not the same as Matthew's, but it is safe to say that the historical Jesus is indigent at times, lacking places to lay his head, and that the charges of blasphemy and sedition that are brought against him are brought by powerful men with much to lose if the Messiah's politics are taken seriously. If Jesus is not *the* poor in John's Gospel, he represents them to the chief priests who plot to execute Lazarus by the end of this chapter.

So if Jesus is *the* poor or represents them, then how will the poor always be with the disciples when the disciples will not always have Jesus? This question is koan-like. Meditating on it may lead to illumination. The subject of death weighs heavily on Jesus' mind, and as already suggested, it is the practice of resurrection that has chief priests thinking in terms of crucifixion.

Deeper into Lent, Jesus revisits the subject of not being with the disciples always. He promises the coming of the Spirit, an Advocate, who will be with them forever. "This," according to Jesus, "is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees this Spirit nor knows its truth. You know this Spirit," Jesus says, "because this Spirit abides with you...and...will be in you."

This Spirit is defined in terms of reception, of welcoming and knowing truth. It abides with the hungry and the thirsty, the sick and imprisoned. It fills empty stomachs and waters parched lips. It is within the diseased bodies and depressed souls in hospitals and in jails. It is where and how God abides on earth as God abides in heaven, and some are simply too afraid to go where God has trod, as stony as that road is; and Moses, the one whom God calls to lead the Hebrews out of slavery, counts himself among them. Being afraid is not a sin; not acting compassionately toward the hungry, thirsty, sick and imprisoned is.

Still, Judas' question deserves an answer regardless of what motivates him to ask. Why spend a year's salary on Jesus' foot cream? Because: Jesus' body is being prepared for burial, and after his burial, nothing will be the same.

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Sure, the poor will still be here, and as long as the poor are with us, Jesus will be, too. In fact, that is where we will find him: in the faces and stories of the poor. If Jesus not only is poor but also represents *the* poor, then we know why Mary invests a year's wages on him: Whatever is done to the least of these members of his family is done unto him. Meaning: If Mary is willing to give a year's wages to Jesus, one ought to be willing to give a year's wages to the poor, and a year's wages is a year's wages regardless of what one earns.

It is doubtful that we will hear much rhetoric like this on Capital Hill, but one may dream. I suspect that there are afternoons in the desert between Egypt and Canaan when the Hebrews that Moses leads out of slavery are hungry and thirsty. Some are sick, and the only reason that none are imprisoned is because criminal proceedings are less formal in the wilderness.

Grumbling with one another and resentful of a past and a people that they could not change, the Hebrews, I think, I would have appreciated Maya Angelou's Lent-appropriate poem "Still I Rise": "You may write me down in history/With your bitter, twisted lies,/You may trod me in the very dirt/But still, like dust, I rise."

Remembering that Jesus faces death and is afraid, it is not difficult to imagine him saying, "You may shoot me with your words/You may cut me with your eyes/You may kill me with your hatefulness/ But still, like air, I rise."

Of course, the historical Jesus does not know this poem, but he knows Psalm 126, and it is not difficult to imagine him finding comfort in the Exodus story, the story that is remembered each and every time that the Passover is observed. It is not difficult to imagine him praying: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the

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watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”

Now back to Maya Angelou: “Out of the huts of history’s shame/I rise/Up from a past that’s rooted in pain/I rise/I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide/Welling and swelling I bear in the tide/Leaving behind nights of terror and fear/I rise/Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear/I rise/Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave/I am the dream and the hope of a slave/I rise/I rise/I rise.” Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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