

Sermon: Indicative or Imperative? Text: John 12:1-11 Lent 5 April 7, 2019
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During the summer months both Elizabeth and I have given sermon series. You get a run of five Sundays and you pick a theme to explore over 5 consecutive weeks. I have been thinking about a summer series on the 5 most misunderstood or most misused passages of Scripture. Maybe today is a prequel. The gospel today is a beautiful story of devotion and grace but it has that one verse that people like to use or maybe abuse: Jesus said: *The poor will be with you always. Or The poor you always have with you.*

Some years ago, in a previous pastorate, I was home on a Saturday night, watching Hockey Night in Canada and I received a phone call from a parishioner. Saturday night at 9pm...Was he in crisis? Was his family in need? No. He was at a dinner party. And he was debating a friend about whether we have an obligation to help those who have less than we do. There was talk in our community of starting up a food bank, a cooperative venture initiated by our churches. Do we need to care for the poor among us? Do we need to think about people in need? And so he phoned his minister to get some ammunition for his debate. He wanted to know if Jesus said those words in the Gospel that we shared: *The poor you always have with you.*

And I learned that if I said yes that Jesus did say those words, and they are there in the gospel today, I, that I would have been supporting a hard hearted point of view. I learned from his wife, who on Sunday morning apologized for his phone call that his argument at the party was: "You can't beat poverty. So don't bother trying. Isn't that what Jesus said? *The poor you always have with you.*"

Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," --- so the argument goes -- we should attend to spiritual needs over, and above, or instead of tangible needs. We should sing and pray rather than act or organize or the feed the poor.

Is that what we can conclude from the words of Jesus: "*The poor you always have with you*"? Many people have taken these words of Jesus and have used them to reach this conclusion.

In Jesus day the poor were very much present. Roman taxation was heavy. The Empire needed roads and buildings and armies. It was expensive to rule a vast part of the world. So the Empire empowered tax collectors who were to tax everyone and then above that they were to make their profit from whatever they could get above the Empire's take. Governors and administrators made their wealth from taxation too; government officials left Rome and took a posting in the provinces in order to make their fortune.

Heavy taxation led to wealth for a very few and to poverty and displacement for perhaps 9 out of 10 people in Jesus world. *The poor you always have with you.* That was Jesus' reality.

In our world the poor are very much with us.

- One in 7 people in Canada lives below the poverty line.
- Nearly 15% of people with disabilities live in poverty.
- One in 5 racialized families live in poverty in Canada, as opposed to 1 in 20 non-racialized families.
- Nearly 15% of elderly single individuals live in poverty.
- 40% of Indigenous children in Canada live in poverty,
- And 60% of Indigenous children on reserves live in poverty.

The distribution of wealth in Canada is unequal and the gap is growing. The top 20% of households in Canada own about 67% of the nation's wealth and the bottom 20% of households in Canada own less than 1%.

In Ottawa 40,000 people depend on food banks each month. Thirty six percent of those people are children.

And globally the numbers are staggering; last year, according to Oxfam, 26 people globally owned the same portion of the world's wealth as the 3.8 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity: the top 26 people have as much wealth as the bottom 4 billion people.

"The poor you always have with you" said Jesus. So are we as Jesus followers just supposed to be indifferent to all of this? Is that the Jesus we encounter in the gospel, someone indifferent to those I need? He shared a table with outcasts, reached out to lepers, healed the sick and gave sight to the blind. He said that it was in those in need that we would meet him, that in giving food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, water to the thirsty we were also giving these things to him.

In the verses that surround Jesus' contentious words in today's gospel we see a poor, itinerant, ragtag group of disciples keeping a common purse and saving money to give to the poor. The Gospels make explicit Jesus' attention to tangible needs like hunger and illness.

Some scholars would point out that Jesus resisted the systems and structures of Empire, like injustice and taxation and oppression, to the extent that he was executed as a rival of Caesar and as an enemy of the Roman Empire. To focus on Jesus is to see him challenge systems of oppression and to always side with the vulnerable, the least of these, the poor and poor in spirit...

And then maybe we have been reading these words of Jesus *in a way that is wrong*.

There's a funny thing in ancient Greek -- sorry to get grammatical for a moment - sometimes the present indicative form of a word, which just *indicates* or states something is the same as the present imperative form of the word, which *commands* you to do. In this contentious verse

we read today the word which is translated “you will have” can be indicative or imperative, a statement or a command ... it looks exactly the same.

So maybe we should read Jesus’ statement about the poor here not as an indication of the way things are, but as a command: Not “you always have the poor with you” but rather “Have *the poor with you always*.”, or *Keep the poor among you always*.”

With this in mind, let’s return to the gospel story. The disciples and some close friends of Jesus are eating dinner. And Mary (friend of Jesus, sister to Lazarus) brings in a pound of expensive perfume (amounting to what a day laborer would make in an entire year). She pours this perfume on Jesus’ feet and his head. This is an anointing scene.

Two big events in ancient Palestine would call for an anointing like this, a coronation and a burial. And Jesus is about to die. He will be leaving soon. Even though he is leaving, his mission remains in the hands of those who follow him. “I am going away,” Jesus says, but the poor are always with you. *Keep the poor with you always*.

Perhaps this statement of Jesus, which has been used to justify disregard for the poor is actually a direct command to always have Jesus’ mission for and among the poor at the forefront of our thoughts and actions. *Keep the poor among you always*.

The poor you always have with you. Keep them there with you.

In my first pastorate there was a man who had spent some years living in Jerusalem and who studied at the Hebrew University while there. He contended that we Western people sometimes missed the meaning and nuance of Jesus words because we read Jesus as if he were a white Anglo Saxon Canadian – everything moderate and calm with little inflection. In Bible study he would read the words of Jesus like someone from the Near East and it was so much fun, it would change the meaning of the words completely. Inflection and emotion matter to meaning.

So....Indicative: The poor you always have with you. Is that a plain statement of fact? So we should just acquiesce to the way of the world and be indifferent to the tangible needs of others? Was Jesus...?

Or

Imperative: Keep the poor **with you, ALWAYS**. Do not forget them. Keep them close to you. Care about them. As Jesus clearly did...