

**Ending Poverty is Possible**  
**Sermon by Liz Theoharis**  
**First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan, CT**  
**January 4, 2009**

Good morning. I hope that everyone had wonderful and love- & spirit-filled holidays. It is honor to have the opportunity to be with you this morning. Especially to preach on this first Sunday in 2009.

This is also Epiphany Sunday. As we celebrate the visit of three wise men from the east to meet the baby Jesus and bring gifts for him, it seems a little ironic to then have a sermon focused entirely on poverty. But then again, from what we know about Jesus, his family and 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, Jesus was pretty poor himself. And poverty had lots to do with the birth of Jesus (his family was homeless at his birth), the life of Jesus (he and his disciples experienced poverty firsthand) and the message of Jesus (where Jesus shares with us that he has come to bring good news to the poor).

Then given the current economic crisis and the growth in joblessness and homelessness, growth that many economists say will continue in 2009, perhaps it is fitting that we consider the moral, the Christian, response to poverty.

As you have heard and seen announced, my name is Liz Theoharis. I am the coordinator of the Poverty Initiative whose mission is to raise up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor. I am also a PhD candidate in New Testament and Christian Origins at Union Theological Seminary and certified for ordination in the PC(USA).

For nearly fifteen years, I have helped build a social movement to end poverty. And on nearly a weekly basis, I have heard, "The poor will always be with you," used to explain the futility of doing anti-poverty work because many claim that poverty is inevitable and can never be ended. It is used to excuse the inaction of churches in the face of growing poverty; it is used to justify the proliferation of charity programs rather than the development of a social movement; and it is used to claim that poor people are sinners and estranged from God rather than that poverty is a sin that could be ended and is God's will that we end it.

This passage is taken from John 12:8 as we heard this morning.

I want to take some time to explore this passage with you this morning because I believe that John 12: 1-8 is possibly the biggest biblical roadblock to ending poverty. Just like slaves and other Abolitionists needed to refute the passage "Slaves, obey your masters" in order to garner support and momentum in the anti-slavery movement, I would assert that if we are ever truly going to end poverty, something I think that is possible and morally necessary, we need to transform our understanding of "The poor will always be with you."

Although this quote comes directly from John 12:8, I question whether many people who use this quote to justify inactivity in the face of an ever-growing polarization of wealth and poverty, know where this line falls in the biblical story. C.H. Dodd, a pretty known biblical scholar, writes about

John 12:8, “It is, however, not to be described as a ‘pronouncement story.’” I wonder, therefore, how the interpretation of this line became a prediction that poverty will never end and how it was separated from its literary context to be quoted by religious leaders, community organizers, social workers, scientists and vast numbers of diverse people.

Several well known biblical scholars actually question the historical reliability of this passage. C.H. Dodd continues in his commentary on John’s Gospel by asserting that biblical scholars engaged in source and redaction criticism of John 12, “seem to establish a certain probability that the aphorism about the poor is not part of the original text of John”. Bultmann, another influential scholar, agrees that the statement about the poor is not original and believes that the poor are not the focus of this story. The Jesus Seminar, a grouping of dozens of experts on the sayings of the historical Jesus, proposes that although contained in all of the gospels, this story and the words of Jesus about the poor are not historically reliable and that the historical Jesus does not say “the poor will always be with you.”

But while there is a part of me that would like to brush off John 12:8 and excuse it away by saying that it is not original to John, that it is just peripheral to the real significance of this passage, and that Jesus (and therefore God) did not say this in the first place, I can’t let myself off the hook that easily.

Although possibly not original, this passage has been included for hundreds of years of interpretation (therefore having an impact), the historical Jesus may not have said it (but Jesus says it in the Bible), and although commentators have asserted that it is not central to John’s message, Lazarus, Mary and Judas who are all central characters in the Gospel of John are present in this passage. All of these issues make me question: how do we make sense of this passage in John 12?

In order to understand this, one must look at the special features of this pericope as told in the Gospel of John.

The poor are all around Jesus and the disciples and the early Church was based among the poor. The tight-knit Johannine community most likely responsible for gathering, sharing and writing the stories of the Gospel of John describes itself as beleaguered and under pressure; I would assert that this community is impoverished and politically subjugated as well. Since, most historical research shows that Jesus was poor himself, this statement has a different ring to it when it comes from the voice of a poor person. Other poor people will be around after Jesus is gone; this particular poor person, Jesus, should be anointed and recognized for what he stands for before his imminent death.

Along with the social and economic context’s import to an interpretation of John 12, the placement of this passage within the entire Gospel bears weight on its interpretation as well. This event takes place right before the crucifixion of Jesus. What jumps out of this passage in the Gospel of John in particular is the role of Judas Iscariot (right before he betrays Jesus). Judas criticizes Mary, the woman who is anointing Jesus with fancy oils – saying that the money could have been given to the poor (or really to him since Judas was the treasurer). Judas is using the poor as an excuse to acquire more money for himself – just like today, some organizations still use poor people as excuses to make money for their benefit.

In John's Gospel, Mary anoints Jesus' feet and then wipes them with her hair. It is interesting to think about Mary, a woman with little power in the ancient world, being the agent in this passage who is doing the anointing because she, unlike many people around her, including most of Jesus' disciples, knows what is going to happen to Jesus. If this is, like Jesus says in his response to Judas' critique, about anointing him for his burial, this relates to the larger questions of death and burial in the ancient world. One of the points of crucifixion was humiliation and no burial, but in this passage Mary comes forward to prepare him for burial.

Jesus' response to Judas and praise of Mary echoes or actually quotes Deuteronomy 15 – one of the most liberating “Jubilee” passages in the Old Testament as we heard from earlier this morning.<sup>1</sup> This passage in Deuteronomy states that because so many people are poor, it is their duty to God to “open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor.” While Jesus' statement in John cuts off before the instruction to care for the poor as in Deuteronomy 15, regularly redistributing society's wealth in order to meet the needs of poor people is implied in Jesus' quote. The echoing of Jesus' response from the Jubilee passages emphasizes that the reason that there are poor people is not because of God's will, but because of humanity's greed and disobedience to God. But “since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth” or “the poor you always have with you” is used to justify inactivity and apathy today, rather than an affront to God as Jesus' quoting of Deuteronomy implies.

Jesus responds to Judas' complaining with this quote from Deuteronomy, referring to the Jubilee laws, which implies that poverty exists because people do not obey God's commandments, and what God commands in light of poverty is generosity. This is another explicit critique of Judas and his greed and possibly the greed of others around Jesus. It is likely that Jesus' contemporaries would have the complete Deuteronomy 15 sentiment in their heads, and would probably be able to fill in the blank when Jesus says “the poor will be with you always” with “so you should give to the poor”.

Reverend Noelle Damico writes about this passage in *Living Micah's Call, Doing Justice, Loving Kindness, Walking Humbly with God: A Guide for Congregations*. “You always have the poor with you” is not meant to be an excuse for doing nothing to address the needs of the poor. On the contrary, the fact that the world will continue to create structures that demean, defraud, and destroy those who are most vulnerable, means that we who are people of God must defy the complacency of the rich, the healthy, and the socially secure and open our hands.”

Although I appreciate the sentiment of Damico's remark, I do not think she goes far enough. I do not believe that Jesus' instruction is only for wealthier people to open their hands to the poor (as may be implied in an interpretation of Deuteronomy 15), but also to embrace the program of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment...If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be...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.’ Deuteronomy 15: NRSV

The main theme of many of Jesus' teachings and his ministry in general is caring for the poor and ending poverty. Jim Wallis from Sojourners Magazine has written that 1 in every 4 stories in the Bible are about poverty, many more stories than pertaining to other issues like marriage or sexuality.

There are passages like Matthew 25 where Jesus reminds us that what we do to the least of these, we do unto him. There is our passage from Ephesians that we read this morning where Paul talks about the "riches in Christ" and we remember that Paul following his revelation of Jesus started a collection for the poor of Jerusalem.

One of my favorites is Luke 4 where Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and announces that he has come to fulfill this passage – to proclaim release to the captives, to bring good news to the poor. That passage in Luke 4 is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It's the first place where he really shows what he's made of, what his life on earth is about. And it has always been an inspiration and a model for me and my ministry.

Poverty was severe in Jesus' day. It is severe today and growing. There are 45 million people without health insurance in the United States. There are millions of people who are homeless in our wealthy nation, yet the vast majority of those homeless people work and the average age of a homeless person in the US is 9 years old. Poverty shortens the lives of many – hundreds of people freeze to death each year and over 18,000 people die for lack of medical care. Even our front line battle troops serving in Iraq right now make so little money that some their families qualify for food stamps and subsidized housing.

Then since the economic crisis began, things are getting worse. We have the highest unemployment rate in decades, 10,000 homes are foreclosed each day, the number of hungry people is growing rapidly.

It seems at times like these that ending poverty is very far away. But from my work among the poor for the past 15 years, I have learned the ending poverty is possible.

I witnessed a miraculous feeding in Philadelphia at Tent City. Tent City was an encampment where over 40 homeless families lived in tents and cardboard boxes during one of Philadelphia's hottest summers. That summer the city's shelters were full and mothers with babies were being told to sleep on the street.

Tent City was set up by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWURU), a multi-racial group of poor and homeless families. There homeless families of different races lived together – sharing donated toys, clothing, food and toiletries. Just like Deuteronomy 15 reads, there was no needy person at Tent City. When a family was evicted and moved to Tent City, they would present their food stamps to the community. When someone needed to go to an appointment, families would volunteer to do childcare and pool their money to pay for the bus for that person. When it was hot, people in the surrounding community would drop off water and juice and all kinds of food.

Governmental and religious institutions were skeptical.

They said (and continue to say) that there is not enough to go around. They told us the poor will be with you always. But in the United States, we throw away 46 million pounds of food each year when it only takes 4 million pounds of food to feed everyone. Policy makers say that we cannot end homelessness but there are more than 12 million empty luxury housing units in the country (more than the estimated 10 million homeless people in the United States). In fact in Philadelphia there are 39,000 abandoned houses when there are about 27,000 homeless people. But families moved to Tent City because homeless shelters were closed and affordable housing programs were cut – the City of Philadelphia was saying there simply was too much need.

A miracle took place at Tent City (a miracle if we are to believe that feeding everybody is impossible without a miracle). Perhaps it was the sharing of what the families brought to Tent City; perhaps it was donations from those who had more than enough from the surrounding community and city, especially from local religious congregations; perhaps it was God's work of creating something out of nothing (or at least creating order out of the chaos of poverty and hunger.) While homeless families moved to Tent City with close to nothing, food and other necessities were abundant at Tent City. In fact, not only was everyone at Tent City fed (and housed for that matter) but there was food and other necessities left over.

KWRU began distributing the extra food, clothing and toys that were brought as donations to the surrounding community. They went out each day with baby buggies bought second hand and distributed the surplus because people in the neighborhood needed it. Not only were they able to feed the families at Tent City but dozens or hundreds of families in the poorest neighborhood in Philadelphia were fed with the extra food. As the months went on, different religious congregations came to witness and pray and worship and share what they had at Tent City. More people heard the good news that there was a place where everyone was fed – more poor families came, more church people came, and they came and they came. And all were amazed at the abundance. And I never left.

So, with this story of a community where such a Jubilee occurs where God's will that no one is needy is met, let's return to our passage from John 12.

I would suggest that we should read John 12 side by side with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." <sup>2</sup>

Willie Baptist, Poverty Initiative Scholar in Residence, who is with us this morning and will share some of his experiences at the Pastor's Forum directly following our worship service asserts that Jesus critiques Judas in John 12 by implying that Judas' cry to save the 300 denarii and give it to the poor is like "flinging a coin to a beggar." Baptist continues that Mary's act of anointing – recognizing and honoring - Jesus is a celebration of someone whose words and actions stand for

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam" Speech at Riverside Church, April 4, 1967

the restructuring the “edifice which produces beggars.” The juxtaposition of the John 12 and Martin Luther King texts, coupled with the example from Tent City, helps bring forth a new reading of this passage through the lens of the Jubilee. We are able to implode an interpretation of this passage that suggests the poverty is inevitable and instead insist that poverty should and could be ended: indeed, this is God’s will.

Finally, all of this study leads me back to the words of John 12:8. The verb “exete” meaning “you have” used in this passage is in an imperative form and not in the future tense. It is, therefore, a command, not a prediction. I am inclined to interpret this command as Jesus instructing the listeners to hitch themselves – throw their lot in – with the poor. In John 12:8, Jesus says “Here! Have the poor with you! In everything you do, keep in mind the poor!” And then the parallel of “Because you do not have me always” reminds us that the poor are the stand-in group for Jesus. Because Jesus is saying he is not going to be physically present forever, here is a group that is Jesus. To remember Jesus is to remember the poor.