

ALWAYS WITH US

John 12:1-8

A week ago yesterday the Church Council and a few other congregational leaders gathered for the better part of the day for a planning retreat. The site of the retreat was the lovely Rutgers Inn on the Douglass Campus of the University. The goal of the retreat was to produce a three-year plan for the congregation, which we did. The weather outside was terrible, but holed up inside, warm and dry, I think it is fair to say that we had a good time thinking about Emanuel, its achievements and its challenges. Once we identified our challenges, we set priorities for action for this year and for the next two years. These sorts of exercises almost always end up being about priorities, figuring out what needs to be done first and what can wait until later. Questions of priorities are as old as the Church.

Consider the story of the anointing of Jesus. We read it in the Gospel of John, but you can find this story or some variant of it in the other three Gospels. The story told in the Gospel of Mark (the oldest of the Gospels) is followed closely in the Gospel of Matthew. In both those Gospels, the setting of the story is also Bethany shortly before the Passover, as it is in the Gospel of John. But in the Gospel of John, the woman who anoints Jesus is identified as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. In the other two Gospels, she is not identified. She is simply “a woman”. In all three of these stories, there is the suggestion that the anointing of Jesus is in anticipation of his burial. In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, the ointment is poured on the head of Jesus, but in the

Gospel of John it is poured on his feet, which the woman then wipes with her hair. There is no hair-wiping in Mark or Matthew.

In the Gospel of Luke, there is another story. In this story, a sinful woman comes to the house of Simon the Pharisee where Jesus is having dinner. She comes to anoint Jesus, but weeping, her tears fall on his feet and she hastily wipes his feet with her hair and then pours the ointment on his feet. In our lesson from John, the story is something of a hodge-podge of bits from the three other Gospels. For example, the loose hair would have been shameful and would not have been appropriate for the lady of the house, Mary. The pouring of the ointment on Jesus' feet would have been strange, but Mary wiping it with her hair would have been unthinkable. John also adds the name of Judas to identify the grudging critic and goes on to attribute bad motives for his criticism of the woman.

All this having been said, the character of Judas raises an interesting question of priorities. There was apparently great poverty in Palestine at the time of Jesus, and we might suppose that there was insufficient housing and less work than workers to do it. The ointment the woman pours on Jesus would have been worth a considerable amount of money—a denarius was the cost of one day's labor for a laborer. Why not sell the ointment and use the proceeds to help the poor, Judas asks? And we must echo him, why not? Does this not seem the better use? But Jesus sides with Mary and says in a phrase that is often misinterpreted by people who would like to forget about the poor, "Leave her alone.... You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." And with this we come to a question of priorities that bedevils the church throughout its history and to this day.

Consider what we are doing right now. We have gathered in this vaulted sanctuary, which is used but a couple of hours per week, in space that is heated and maintained specifically for the purpose of this gathering and gatherings like this. We have all sorts of printed material and books we have purchased and produced to support this worship; there are musicians paid, to say nothing of a paid leader to conduct the worship. We have taken time for this worship which we are supporting with our talents and our treasure. And why? For the love of God is the short answer. But could not the resources we are spending at this very moment be used and perhaps more faithfully used for love of neighbor, and specifically to help relieve the misery of the poor? What good does this worship do them? What good does it do God? Surely, this worship is for us, and we engage in it even as poor people, in this very city and all over the world, live in heart-rending situations without even the necessities of life. Think about children in such circumstances. What might the energy and wealth we are spending on this hour do for them?

Yes, well, that is Judas' question in John's Gospel, and whether or not the question is well-motivated, it is a good question that deserves our consideration. Seemingly, a question of priorities.

Any question of priorities involves at least two terms vying for precedence over the other or others. In this case, the two terms would seem to be the piety of worship and love of neighbor. Christian worship is rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus among whose teachings is that the poor are to be cared for. Christians are certainly not the only people in the world who believe this, but this is a belief that has for most of us come out of our faith or from values that our faith has invested in our culture. We believe that care

for the poor is something godly, which is to say, something the God we worship in this space would have us do. In this sanctuary, we celebrate godliness in song and word and sacrament to remind us of who we are and who we ought to be, to remind us of who is our God and to renew our hope for the world and for ourselves. Furthermore, in so doing we come together with God at the center of our community with one another, God as Holy Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being. In this setting, in this worship, we express our love for God who calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. But is not the love of our neighbor and especially the love of our poor neighbor the more urgent of these loves? Again, is this worship of ours not a rather self-indulgent exercise when there are those who are dying for want of the necessities of life?

The answer is, yes, it is self-indulgent if it does not lead us to love our neighbors better than we do, if this worship is separated from the practice of this love and becomes an end in itself which we never get beyond; it is self-indulgent if we are merely being religious, when in Christ we have been called to be faithful.

There is much bad religion in the world today and throughout history, religion that is just as Marx said, a narcotic to put the masses to sleep to their real condition in the world with promises of the next world where everything will be better. The consequence of this is that the poor are forsaken and often in their confusion even forsake themselves and their own cause in the world. But this is clearly a perversion of the Christian faith and the church which has as its mission to love God and neighbor. For the Christian, neither of these loves is prior to the other, though, practically speaking, it is possible to come to the love of God through the love of neighbor or to come to the love of neighbor through the love of God. But in our faith, these two loves are finally inseparable. It is

not a matter of either/or. We love God *and* neighbor, neighbor *and* God, because both are real and both are to be loved.

Or to put this another way, according to our faith, Jesus is God's Word in the flesh, and to love him is to love *both* God and neighbor at one and the same time. Moreover, in this season of the Church Year, we are encouraged to see Jesus as the poorest and most vulnerable of our neighbors, executed by the authorities like a thief, forsaken, with no one to defend him, a victim who by rights should have dropped like a stone into the deep well of history, never to be heard from again. When Mary anoints him, he is the poorest of the poor. But God also anoints him and in *this* anointing, he is the Christ. It is the story of our faith that God lives in the flesh of the poorest of the poor and that we love the God whom we cannot see in the poor whom we always have with us. It is in this context that we must figure out what the resources of our congregation, including the resource of this sanctuary are for. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2010

Emanuel Lutheran Church