

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 7, 2019 (V Lent, Year C)

Let's be honest. You're not going to remember much of what I have to say this morning. That's not a knock on your listening skills, and it's *certainly* not a reflection on my finely honed preaching prowess. But over the next couple of weeks with Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter looming over the liturgical calendar, we encounter the holiest, most riveting, captivating, and compelling moments of the Christian year.

We will journey from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem with palm branch and shouts of "Hosanna" to the Upper Room for the Last Supper to the agony of the cross and cries of "Crucify" to the joy of the empty tomb. That's a lot of holy water under the bridge to go before we get to our destination. And so this sermon, like the Fifth Sunday in Lent in general will, at best, be overshadowed.

Which is, in many ways, how it should be. But on this *particular* Sunday before Palm Sunday, Jesus speaks about a group of people who often live in the shadows. People who remain invisible and unnoticed and ignored by vast segments of the population. People who themselves remain overshadowed by life itself: the poor.

But he does so in the context of a dinner party thrown in his honor, amid some of his closest friends in the days before his crucifixion. Jesus will soon be betrayed, arrested, and crucified — the very story that, as a worshipping community, we will soon enter into deeply and intentionally. Rather than run away and try to avoid his destiny, Jesus is doing what we'd probably all do if we knew the end was coming — he's spending time with the ones he cares most deeply about. He's at the home of Lazarus, the one whose death Jesus wept over before raising him from the dead. Martha's running around as usual; bringing food and clearing plates. Mary is sitting at his feet. Judas is there as are, presumably, a number of the other disciples.

There's nothing strange about this scene, with one exception: Mary is anointing Jesus' feet with the ancient Palestinian equivalent of Chanel Number 5. It's an extravagant, luxurious, exuberant, abundant display of affection. She wipes Jesus' feet with her hair and perfume so expensive that it was roughly equivalent to the yearly wages of a day laborer.

This is when Judas pipes up, indignantly demanding to know why the perfume wasn't sold and the money given to the poor? John quickly tells us Judas was a thief and his motives weren't pure. But still, it's a valid question. You could do a lot of good with 300 denarii.

"You always have the poor with you," Jesus replies. Now, taken out of context, that's a terrible answer. An apathetic way of ignoring the crushing poverty that has long impacted the lives of so many. And over the years these words have been reduced to a justification of indifference. A moral shrug of the shoulders. "Well, you know what Jesus said. 'We'll always have the poor around,' so it's not like we need to completely inconvenience ourselves to deal with issues of poverty: hunger, the homeless, income inequality. Or anything else that would take us out of our comfort zones and force us to actually confront Jesus' words about taking care of the least of these. Sure, he said stuff about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and welcoming the stranger. But apparently he also said the hungry and the naked and the stranger will always be hanging around, so they can wait! And, frankly, I have places to be and things to do. I'm busy. And I'm important. Certainly busier and more important than the hungry, naked, impoverished stranger who's sleeping outside on the heating grate I can't even see, because I don't live in *that* neighborhood." You always have the poor with you.

If I'm honest with myself, *truly* honest, I've had such thoughts, or at least similar ones, as I've passed yet another homeless person on the streets of Boston or Quincy or even, yes, Hingham. I feel like I'm a better person than some because at least I feel some guilt about the situation, or mutter a prayer under my breath as I pass by. And I'm even familiar enough with Scripture to justify my indifference with this very passage: "You always have the poor with you."

And you can't help everyone. Most of us aren't St. Francis. We're not going to literally sell all our possessions and give the money to the poor and live off the goodwill of others. That's generally not our calling, and even if it were, there would still be people who would go to sleep hungry that night. And even if you emotionally try to help everyone, pray for every person in need you encounter, pray for every situation you read about in the newspaper or hear about on the news, or scroll through on your Facebook feed, you'll end up emotionally spent, weeping in the fetal position on your kitchen floor because it's all just too much. With nothing left to give anyone in your own circle of friends and family.

So there's a self-protective quality to this justification that "you always have the poor with you." That there will always be situations that you can't fix; that there will always be people you can't help; that there will always be problems you can't solve; that there will always be hurts you can't heal; in others and in yourself. Because "you always have the poor with you."

And, yet, Jesus' words are not meant as a justification, but as a reminder. It's not, give up trying to help, because you'll always have the poor among you. But a reminder that the poor will always be among you. Jesus is telling us that poverty is part of the human condition, because we live in a broken and sinful world; that many live in conditions and circumstances that break the very heart of God. That until the kingdom of God is realized on earth as it is in heaven, injustice will abide.

And into this pre-existing condition, he's reminding us to never neglect the poor. To remember them even when they are invisible. To live our lives as if they are in our midst and at our table and around our altar. Jesus himself will carry them on his heart as he walks through the procession of palms and as he offers bread and wine to his friends at the Last Supper, and lovingly washes their feet; and he will carry them on his heart as he struggles to bear his cross up Calvary's hill, and as he breathes his last, and as he rises in glory. And he bids us to do the same as we take our journey through Holy Week and Easter.

There's a Twitter account I follow called Invisible People. I can't remember how I heard about it — probably someone mentioned it at a church conference. What they do, aside from advocate for the homeless, is share pictures and stories and names of homeless people throughout the country. It's with their permission, of course, and it's always with people they're working with to get off the streets. But as you scroll through opinions about sports and politics and religion, you find yourself pausing and reflecting on the very real people poverty effects. Invisible People is jarring in its specificity — which is precisely the point. You can't help but gaze upon their faces; look into their eyes; see the humanity looking back at you; see the face of Jesus. "The poor" cannot be a faceless, amorphous, other. That just keeps our fellow human siblings at a safe distance. Names and faces and stories are important — it's why Jesus ate with the poor and marginalized again and again.

As I said, you probably won't remember my words this morning. They'll get mixed up in a swirl of liturgical drama and action and the haunting and glorious music that accompanies the journey of the next couple of weeks. And that's fine. But remember this: "You always have the poor with you." And keep them close to your heart as we prepare to walk the way of the cross.