

“The Heart of Serving”

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John 21: 15-17; Mark 12: 28-31

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Last week we were in the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus shortly before Jesus' death; with Mary washing Jesus' feet with a rare and incredibly expensive bottle of pure nard perfume. And we remember Jesus saying that the greatest commandment in the entire Bible is:

“Hear O Israel, the Lord, the Lord almighty is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

This week I want to talk about the second part of that commandment: *“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”* and our call to reach out.

In the story of Mary and the perfume, Judas the treasurer was grumbling and saying what probably all the others were thinking: *“What a waste! This bottle should have been sold and the money given to the poor!”*

But Jesus does not share the condemnation. Instead, he praises Mary, who was loving her Lord with all her heart, with all her mind and soul and body through this extravagant act of love. But what about Judas' point? What about the poor? And even more, what about Jesus' response? *“Leave her alone... You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”*

His response sounds dismissive. Was Jesus saying that we should not bother with the poor? Was he saying that all of our giving and living should go to Jesus and that we should forget about the poor?

Not at all. In fact, when Jesus said: *“There will always be poor people among you”*, he was quoting a passage of scripture from the book of Deuteronomy; and scholars believe that this passage would have been familiar to his disciples so they would have been able to finish the scripture reading. This was after all, an oral society – so much would have been recited and memorized. Deuteronomy 15:11 says: *“There will always be poor people in the land.”* But then it goes on to say: *“Therefore I command you to be openhanded towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.”*

The two parts of the commandments “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself*” go together. You can’t have one without the other. If you worship God but neglect the poor, then you are not adequately worshipping God; but if you only care for the poor and you never put your heart, soul and strength into loving God, then you might be a good person but you’re basically not a Christian.

Be careful of doing the work of the Lord, but forgetting the Lord of the work.

I remember the running joke about the United Church a couple of decades ago was that the United Church was the “*NDP at prayer*”. It was a pretty good joke, but it doesn’t hurt for us to remember that social justice is not the NDP’s idea, or for that matter any political party’s idea — it’s God’s idea.

The letter of James to the church reads: “*Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.*” (James 1:27 *The Message*). Actually, I could read scripture passage after scripture passage in the Old and New Testaments that affirms and re-affirms that God sees and cares about the poor and the oppressed and calls us to do the same. I’ll read a couple:

“You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror.” (Psalm 10:17-18)

Or how about Jesus saying:

“I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.”

“Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ ‘Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25: 35-40)

And even the early church understood and lived out their faith this way — so much so that the Romans noticed them. The Romans were fascinated and suspicious that this group of Christians would not only help the needy who were Christian, they also took in and helped those who

were not Christian. In this way, they lived differently than the culture around them that was based more on honour and shame.

I know I am preaching to the choir. This church reaches out and makes a difference in so, so many ways. Our Outreach and Social Action Committee is a phenomenal group of people who get behind important projects and situations and then bring them to us so that together we can be part of this love in action. If you would like to be involved with that committee, talk to the chair Dave Bremner who is sitting at the back of the church or any of the other committee members.

One of the ways they serve is today's ministry of the bake sale for the Canadian Foodgrains bank. (Look for the red aprons!)



This is such a worthwhile Christian organization that focuses on world hunger. It began with the Mennonite Central Committee, and in 1983 it was rebranded and opened up to other churches. Today 15 church agencies, representing 30 denominations with over 17,000 congregations, make up the membership of Canadian Foodgrains Bank. They include Baptist, Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Lutheran, United, Evangelical, Salvation Army, Presbyterian ...I'm not sure who I left out, but as you can tell most churches in Canada are part of this organization, which is amazing. And from the beginning, the Canadian Government has been a partner in this organization by matching the donations on a 4:1 basis. It began as a way for farmers to give some of their crop to world hunger, but it has gone far beyond that today.

The Executive Director, Jim Cornelius, remembers going to the Eastern Ethiopian community of Bila with the Foodgrains Bank back in 1984 during the big famine that you probably remember. Many people had died or were dying and he, along with others, came with emergency food relief. But the Canadian Foodgrains Bank stayed on and continued to help in that area after the famine to help improve the farming and food sustainability.



When he went back to visit the same area many years later Cornelius said: "It felt like I was entering an oasis. There were fruit trees growing everywhere and high value crops were being produced for sale in local markets."

The community was self-reliant and has not needed any food assistance for over 30 years.” That’s an incredible good news story – all because churches came together to care about those who are hungry in this world.

This church does a lot — and we do seem to do a lot with food! What I love about the big (free) Thanksgiving dinner, where we serve about 300 people, is that often people who don’t know one another end up sharing a table. Of course, some just keep their heads down and eat and leave, but at most of the tables there’s all sorts of lively conversation and laughter.

The difference that we are making at this church that I feel we are particularly called to is connecting people to one another and connecting them to God. It is a ministry of hospitality.

One of the greatest poverties that I notice in this country is the poverty of genuine connection and community. More people live alone than ever before. You can endure a lot of other poverties, of money, of health when you know there are people who care about you.

In the following video, a single apartment-dwelling woman invites a neighbour to join her for dinner. They set up a table in the narrow hallway, and thus starts a chain reaction that fills the hall with more neighbours, food and laughter.

<https://youtu.be/vDuA9OPyp6I>

Jesus said to Peter and to each of us: “*Do you love me? Feed my sheep*”. There is a great deal of need out there and certainly we cannot meet it all, nor are we called to. But in our own way, as the church and as Christians, we are called to feed and nourish bodies and souls. Let us continue to love the Lord fully and to connect in prayer ... so that we can feed even more, and bring more and more life to our church, our community, and our world.

Thanks be to God.