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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Empire, the Poor, and the Compassion of Christ

Matthew 26:6-13

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum and the money given to the poor.” But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

This is a story—this story about a jar of ointment and an anonymous woman in a no-account house, in a no-account village, in a no-account country—this is a story about Empire. This is a story about Power. When I say Empire, I mean the ways that Power maintains itself. And, when I say Power, sometimes I mean powerful people (my broken self might even have some particular folks in mind, if I am honest). But more than people, when I say Empire and Power, I mean the tangled ways and webs and systems that work to maintain things the way they are. Where some dominate and oppress others and everyone is trapped.

Empire thrives by creating the appearance of scarcity. If it convinces the people that there isn't enough to go around, the people are more likely to turn against each other than to turn against the Empire. Empire convinces us that there isn't enough power, and only some are wise enough, mature enough, knowledgeable enough, or strong enough to have it. Also, there is generally not enough capital—not enough money, goods, or services for everyone. And not enough safety. The late Walter Wink—biblical scholar, theologian, and activist—notes that Empire is “characterized by inequality, patriarchy, economic injustice, hierarchicalism, and racism.” And Empire says that the only alternative is chaos. And this is a story about Empire, but it is also a story about redemption. I have to admit, I do not yet know what the full redemption of the Empire looks like. Power has so convinced us that its ways are the only ways, the choices it lays out and selects from are the only available choices. It is difficult to see any another. But the promise of Jesus is that redemption is coming and is even already here. And that is what the woman says with her alabaster jar, and her costly ointment, and her generous act.

The disciples really struggle to wrestle free of Empire's grip. You can tell by the way the react when Simon the Leper's house fills with the smell of the ointment—an earthy,

woody, musky smell. The disciples immediately invoke the needs of the poor—while discreetly hiding their own valuables and impulse buys. The disciples aren't alone in their struggle with Empire, you can tell by the many, many ways Jesus's statement about the poor has been taken out of context. "The poor you will have with you always" is most often invoked to refuse service and care to those in need, especially to refuse to give the poor what they need most—money and influence.

This story is nestled between three episodes, each one a perspective on Jesus's death. Immediately framing today's story, the religious elite plan to arrest and kill him. These were the folks handpicked by the Romans as those most interested in retaining their wealth, power, and status, who have much to lose—including their own lives—if Rome perceives Jesus as a threat. After today's story, Judas, seemingly without motive agrees to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. But first, Jesus predicts his own death, the inevitable fate of all who challenge the Empire. When Jesus predicts his death, he ties it to the upcoming Passover celebration. It is as if he asks, will we be more like the Israelites, eagerly awaiting our deliverance? Or like Pharaoh, with his hardened heart? Will we believe Empire when it says there isn't enough power to go around, and that violence is the only way to maintain peace, and that without Empire, chaos will reign? Or, will we pursue another way?

Because there is another way.

Jesus assures us that there is another way. And his reception of the woman's gift, the abundance of the ointment, the cost, the smell, the striking generosity of the action itself—It is a reminder of the other way. The other way—Jesus's way—is generous and compassionate. It is the way of love.

We do still have the poor with us. Warren Carter, who calls himself an exegete—a textual interpreter—specializing in the Gospel of Matthew, notes that, when Jesus says this, he is recognizing that "poverty always accompanies imperial rule and will do so until God's [reign] is established." Other scholars note that the verb that in that sentence—you always have the poor with you" that verb that is rendered "you have" can be in the indicative mood, as we have it translated before us today, or as an imperative: Keep the poor with you always. Both interpretations urge followers of Jesus to change their attitudes toward poverty by working toward justice with compassion and generosity.

Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit Priest who create the world's largest gang intervention and rehabilitation program in the world, Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. If you wanted something to read to put yourself in the mind of Holy Week, I would heartily recommend his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*. The audiobook is even better when you hear it in his voice, and the way it breaks with love and sorrow when he remembers the gang members he loves. Dolores Mission Church, at the time the poorest Catholic church in LA, was situated among two massive housing projects and the territories of numerous gangs. Boyle, his congregation, and community members began developing new initiatives for gang

members and former gang members—an alternative school, a day care program, tattoo removal services, and legitimate employment. There isn't enough time to talk about all the resources Homeboy Industries offers to those stuck in cycles of violence and to those incarcerated by an Empire who feels they are expendable. Once, when Boyle was reflecting on the work of his organization he said, "Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it."

When I read that, I think about the disciples' reaction to the woman who anoints Jesus, their judgment of all she must be carrying and all she must have been freed from, to serve Jesus in this way. And then I think about the love with which Jesus proclaims, "Truly I tell you—amen, amen—wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." The patriarchy lost her name, and *still* we tell her story because Jesus loves her.

This is the way of Jesus. This is the challenge to Empire. Empire thrives when the people believe they do not have enough and that they are simply not enough. Walter Wink says, "In an economy of scarcity, love is dished out only to the worthy. Those who fail to receive love are taught to blame themselves for a situation that is systemic." But we challenge the Empire—that is our baptismal call: to serve all people and strive for justice and peace. We set people free when we share with them the love of God, overflowing, abundant, compassionate and generous. The ultimate resistance to despair is love. To proclaim that we are all loved—all—because we are all of immeasurable value to God.

We can talk about the poor all day and we must. And this is right. We must do something for the sake of those who are crushed under the wheels of Empire. We must challenge our country and our world's love of violence. We must challenge the ubiquitous message that there is not enough to go around and the messages that want to tell us exactly who is responsible for it—a message of judgment for all that is carried by the those the Empire considers of no value. We must flood the world with the compassion of Christ. We must see within those pushed to the margins great worth, and inherent giftedness, and immeasurable belovedness.

But, Beloved, I want to say from this pulpit, too: I want you to hear this: God sees where *you* are crushed under the wheels of Empire. Empire traps us all. God sees the job you didn't get, the promotion that passed you by, the debt you've taken on, the divorce that gutted you, the nasty word someone said about you, the medication you need but can't get, the sport that you aren't allowed to play, the person you're told you can't love. Empire has us all tangled up knots—every single one of us. It is at the hands of Empire that Jesus died. It is at the hands of Empire that Jesus died, and, full of compassion, full of the kind of love that resists despair, Jesus died in order that you and I and all of creation—the whole cosmos—might be set free.

Amen.