

“Opening Our Hands”
Deuteronomy 15:7-11/Matthew 26:6-13

They are the most misinterpreted words Jesus ever spoke. While some scholars might disagree with that assertion, I cannot think of another statement from our Lord taken out of context more frequently than the moment he said “you always have the poor with you.” As beginning with those who heard it spoken and continuing to this day with those who have read of it, untold individuals have cited that comment as a way of saying there’s nothing we can do about poverty; that all of our efforts will come to naught and thus implying there’s no use trying. And friends, if you hear nothing else I say this morning, hear this: Jesus’ intent could not have been any more different.

He spoke those words in the passage we just read. All of the Gospels have variations to that moment and three have Jesus utter the same phrase. In Matthew, it comes on a day when Jesus is a guest in the home of a leper named Simon. While he sits, an unnamed woman comes up with a jar of expensive ointment and pours it over his head. This is not one of those moments near the end of a football game when the victorious coach is drenched by his players. No, even though time is winding down for Jesus, too, the meaning of her act is vastly different.

I would have thought they would have been upset that the woman had come up behind their teacher and carried out this act without his permission, but that isn’t the issue. “Why this waste” they angrily complain. “This ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” Just prior to that scene Jesus had spoken of eternal punishment for those who do not care for “the least of these who are my brothers and sisters,” so it’s likely the disciples expect their teacher’s praise for thinking first in this moment about the poor, yet as was true often in their years together Jesus surprises them. “Why do you trouble the woman?” he says. “She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” He tells them of how she has just anointed his body for burial and will be praised in the future for what she has done. The disciples, who don’t realize how soon his death will come, are silent while Judas quickly leaves to arrange his teacher’s betrayal.

That’s the context for Jesus saying “you always have the poor with you.” Given what is about to occur for him, he seems to be saying that her priority was the right one because the reality of poverty will continue long after he is gone. Yet his words do not mean that concern for the poor should ever cease in his followers for as one of my seminary professors put it “Showing mercy to the needy of the earth is an everyday occurrence for children of God’s kingdom and being compassionate to the poor is a constant mission of the church.” (Long, Thomas G. *Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, p. 292). In other words while the poor will always be with us our concern for them is to be just as eternal. The question, of course, is how we can best respond.

Last fall, I took part in a poverty simulation offered by the Bucks County Opportunity Council. At check-in that day, I received a warm greeting and then was given materials for the event including a name tag and a description of my identity for the next few hours. I was to be an 8 year boy who was part of a group with three others. They were to portray the grandparents and older sister with whom I lived. The facilitator welcomed the 50 or so present and we began.

She gave us some facts about economic realities. Bucks County has 41,000 individuals who live at or below the federal poverty threshold which, for a family of four, is \$25,750. I did the math. A person who makes the minimum wage and works full-time for 52 weeks earns about

\$15,000. If there are two in a household who work, they can clearly make more, but if they earn one dollar greater than the poverty benchmark, they lose eligibility for all public assistance.

The purpose of the simulation, however, wasn't just to provide us with startling data, but to experience what it is like for individuals in our county who face a daily struggle to survive. So over the course of the morning we experienced four days, each compressed into 20-30 minutes where we would react to a particular set of challenges. Each group began by reading its unique description of circumstances. The key variables for me was that one of my grandparents was disabled and neither owned a car. After being clear about our roles we all began.

As an eight year-old, of course, my day should have revolved around school, but at various points, the facilitator would walk up and give me a card detailing how things had just changed. The first one revealed that I was sick and had to stay home. That wasn't a problem since my grandfather would be there with me. Later, I got a card stating that I couldn't return to school until some late fee had been paid. Thus, my grandmother had to take off time from work for that task, but being paid by the hour meant further impact on a tight household budget. The last unexpected event came when law enforcement removed me from the home because of suspected neglect. I sat for most of that "day" with Child Protective Services as it took time for word to reach my grandparents and for them to retrieve me. One complication after another arose as agencies didn't always honor posted office hours, public transportation posed its own limits and a missing piece of paperwork could stop everything. From start to finish, all of the participants and leaders stayed in character.

Once the simulation ended, the facilitator led us in a debrief asking us to describe what it had been like. The phrases from the group included "chaotic...degrading ...overwhelming ...victims of bureaucracy." It brought to my mind an incident years before when John Kennedy was running for the Senate and was asked at a campaign stop by a poor laborer "Mr. Kennedy, do you know what it's like to not be able to pay your bills, to wonder how you'll get food on the table, to struggle just to make ends meet? Do you know what it is like to be poor?" Kennedy didn't try to deny his privileged upbringing and instead softly answered. "No, I don't know what it's like to be poor." And the man responded "Well, you haven't missed a thing." (Howell, James, *The Beatitudes for Today*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p. 35) All of us who took part in that simulation knew first-hand what he meant.

"You always have the poor with you," Jesus said and he was right, but what is often forgotten by those who then misinterpret his intent is how in that phrase our Lord was actually quoting Scripture, more precisely, our reading from Deuteronomy. And when we hear the rest of that passage, it becomes clear Jesus was seeking something more in that statement.

That Old Testament book offers a detailed explanation of God's intention for his covenant people as conveyed by Moses the one who had led them to freedom. The chapter from which we read begins with a call to observe something called the Sabbatical year, when every seven years, the people were to forgive all the debts owed them. The idea behind that command was that individuals would have a chance to start over just as forgiveness gives us an opportunity to start fresh with God, too. Lest you think those people readily followed that standard, there is actually no evidence to suggest the Israelites ever did it; clearly the resistance most of us would feel in being told to forgive all debts owed to us did not originate with this generation.

Moses knew that such a concept would be difficult to implement and enforce even then so in our reading that leader appeals to their conscience. "Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbors," he said "You should rather open your hand." He then speaks the words Jesus named centuries later. "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the

earth,” Moses said “I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and the needy neighbor in your land.’”

There it is; the completion of the Biblical command Jesus began when his disciples were so upset by the extravagant act of one woman. “You always have the poor with you,” he said and perhaps expected them to finish silently that phrase by adding “so open your hand.” Jesus’ words clearly were not a suggestion we should stop trying to eradicate poverty, but rather that we collectively open our hands in financial, relational and generous ways as an ongoing response to the economic hardship faced by neighbors in need. What might that look like?

On the last Sunday before the start of my Clergy Renewal Leave, a member of DPC handed me a folded \$20 bill and asked that I give it to someone in need that I met during my travels. I saw many such persons, but kept his gift until I was leaving a church that marks the final resting place of a woman credited with bringing Christianity to the country of Georgia. As I exited that sanctuary, I spotted a mother in need sitting alone. She had her head bowed and hand outstretched. A gift from one here eased part of her struggle that day.

Perhaps that is the way you will open your hand or maybe it will be through the Code Blue ministry we are hosting this month for homeless neighbors. Many of you are helping make that time of hospitality occur on these colds nights and the children of DPC are participating today, too, in preparing meals, and gathering socks and making Valentine’s cards Perhaps the place you might open your hand is through contacting elected officials to enact change that will help ease the struggle of individuals or maybe it will come in drawing from your experience to teach needed life or work skills to another. It might be something else entirely. Our poverty emphasis in the congregation this month is intended to raise the question of what we can do as individuals and a body of faith to respond. There is no one way to do that, but Jesus calls each of us to use our particular gifts and creativity to make a difference.

On a cold winter night in 1935, Fiorella LaGuardia, the mayor of New York City appeared in a night court in the poorest ward of his city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself and soon a downtrodden woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. “My daughter’s husband has deserted her,” the woman explained. “She’s sick and her children are starving.” The store owner had experienced frequent theft from his business and refused to drop charges, saying to the mayor “It’s a bad neighborhood, your honor, and she’s got to be punished on this is to teach other people a lesson.”

LaGuardia nodded and turning to the woman said “I’ve got to punish you; the law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days.” Even while speaking the words, though, the mayor-turned-judge reached into his pocket took out a ten dollar bill. Throwing it into his hat he turned to the courtroom and said, “Here’s the ten dollar fine, which I now remit, and furthermore, I’m going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person had to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.” The woman left the courtroom with \$47.50. (variation of story also told in Fadiman, Clifton, ed. *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*. Little & Brown: Boston, 1987, p. 339)

“You always have the poor with you,” Jesus said, proclaiming a fact that we know to be true. Yet with those words he also urges a faithful response that continues always, too.