

*Either ... Or*

**A sermon preached by**  
James F. McIntire

© Copyright 2010  
James F. McIntire  
All rights reserved.

**Texts:**  
**John 12: 1-8**

**March 21, 2010**  
**Lent 5**



**Hope United Methodist Church**  
Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA  
Phone: 610-446-3351  
Web: [www.HavHopeUMC.org](http://www.HavHopeUMC.org)  
Office: [HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net)  
Pastor: [HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net)

## John 12: 1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."



In the song "Everything's Alright" from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's interpretation of our Gospel passage for the morning – the confrontation between Jesus and Judas – the anointing of Jesus prior to his entrance into Jerusalem – Judas sings indignantly at Mary (incorrectly Magdalene in the opera but Mary of Bethany in the Gospel) and by doing so presents Jesus with a confrontational question – "Woman, your fine ointment, brand new and expensive, could have been saved for the poor. Why has it been wasted? We could have raised maybe 300 silver pieces or more! People who are hungry, people who are starving, matter more than your feet and hair!"

Despite its overt anti-Semitism, *Jesus Christ Superstar* remains one of my favorite musicals and, particularly this time of the year the DVD and CD find their way into my Lenten preparation. It is a foundation for me – and many in my generation – understanding of

the Passion Story. But this scene is one that has always confounded me so whenever I come back to John's Gospel account of the interaction between these three, Jesus Christ Superstar plays in my head.

Judas is absolutely right, isn't he? It does seem like a waste – the money could have been used better for the poor, for the hungry and starving of this world. Jesus' response has always bothered me as well. "You always have the poor with you . . .," John's Gospel reads. "Surely you're not saying we have the resources to save the poor from their lot. There will be poor always, pathetically struggling, look at the good things you've got!" sings Rice and Webber's Jesus.

Mostly, I just want to sing back or shout back, "No, no, no, Jesus, you're wrong. The poor don't always have to be poor. Not if we use what we have to help them out."

You see, the confusion for me becomes the question, "What am I supposed to do – worship Christ or serve the poor?" Which is it? *Either* I anoint his feet *or* I use the silver to feed the hungry. "Worship Christ or serve the poor?"

Obviously Jesus spent most of his time and energy and focus among the poor. "Whenever you do it to these least of these, you do it to me," "Blessed are the poor," Feed the hungry, and clothe the naked." Evangelical leader Jim Wallis tells us that the Church is way off base when it comes to its "moral values" debate about sexuality or abortion. He reminds us that the poor and poverty is mentioned thousands of times in Christian scripture while homosexuality is barely mentioned at all. Our focus is wrong.

"[Poverty] is the big issue on God's heart," Wallis says, "if we take the Bible seriously. Three million people living on less than \$2 a day. Thirty thousand children dying every single day of what I call a silent tsunami—nobody pays attention to it."

I met Martin Luther King, III, this past Thursday night at the National Constitution Center where he and Gwen Ifill and two others were leading an open dialogue on race at the second anniversary of then-Senator Barrack Obama's speech on race in America, "A More Perfect Union." Mr. King reminded us of his father's 3-point agenda for America – a call for us to address racism, poverty, and militarism. "We've made some little progress with racism," King told us on Thursday night, "but as for the other two, poverty and militarism, we've done almost nothing. In fact, we may be worse off now than we were 40 years ago."

Poverty was arguably the most important theme of Jesus ministry. Dr. King knew that. We all probably know that even if we're reluctant to admit it. Yet poverty continues to be a part of the American dilemma as the chasm between the rich and poor continues to widen as we move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

But what happens in John's Gospel when Judas suggests that we can actually do something about it? Jesus freaks-out. "Wait a minute. What's going on here?"

Yesterday I was in Washington, DC and as I made my way along New York Avenue headed toward the city, I saw that imposing structure off to the right on the highest hill in the area – the National Cathedral. Whenever I've visited that magnificent and inspiring facility I have been awed by the grandeur of the worship space. If you've ever been there or to any number of the great cathedrals in the US or Europe, you probably know what I mean. The architecture, the windows, the stone, the ornate carvings, and quite simply the vastness of the space leave one feeling awed and inspired. Yet why spend so much money on a building? Why has our gold and silver been wasted on the ointment when we could have fed and housed the poor? The answer lies somewhere in this Gospel scene.

What Jesus tells us is that worship and service are so intimately interconnected and interdependent that they cannot be separated.

We need to worship God. We are *not* in any danger of losing God despite what some will argue is a secularist attempt to eliminate God. God is God; not a commodity whose value rises and falls with the mood of human beings. Whether or not there is public prayer in schools; whether or not there are nativity creches in our public squares; whether or not the mention of "God" is in the Pledge of Allegiance; whether or not "In God we trust" is on our money – God isn't going anywhere. None of that stuff really matters to God and it really shouldn't matter to us as believers.

God always has been and always will be. We are not in danger of losing God. What we are in danger of losing, though, is our experience of transcendence, of reverence, of the grandeur of worship, our connecting with God in meaningfully spiritual ways. Amidst the noise and activity and technology of post-modernity it is becoming more and more challenging to find time and space where we can be drawn out of our individualized selves into an experience of God's holy presence. And that's all about personal choice – choosing time, finding space, claiming the focus required to truly worship God, to tangibly praise God, to intentionally reach out to God.

Where do the sacred and profane meet? Where do the holy and ordinary intersect? Where does eternity momentarily suspend time so that we might "worship God in spirit and truth"? (John 4: 23)

Our church buildings are meant to be places where we can get the time and the space to be drawn out of ourselves so we can experience God's holiness. Yet sometimes we pollute the atmosphere which true worship requires. We cannot experience the revelation of God unless there is a place where the ordinary can encounter the eternal. Where is that place?

A Harvard psychologist recently remarked how at one time he taught that a meaningful and fulfilled life could be achieved by those who built their lives on three pillars – enjoyable work, a true experience of loving and being loved, and satisfying recreation. Now he adds a fourth pillar – meaningful worship. Worship is a celebration that should put us in touch with the truth that shapes our whole life. Worship is a necessary element not only for our spiritual formation, but for us to live a fulfilled life.

Jesus knew that. He knew the value of what Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, was doing for him. She was engaged in worship – an experience that could put her in touch with truth, that would allow her to experience the transcendence of God. Mary found a place and space where the holy and profane could faithfully and safely meet. Mary found a way to touch the truth that would shape her life.

Yet Judas’ argument rings down through the ages even to today. Why build cathedrals when we could better use the money to end poverty? Why don’t we spend all that we have to feed the hungry?

Jesus’ answer is subtle. “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” Does that mean that we can’t do anything about the poor? I always thought that’s kind of what it said. Or maybe Jesus says focus on me now and you can get to the poor later. But what I am realizing now is something slightly different. “You always have the poor with you.” Jesus is reminding us that since they are *always* with us, we must *always* serve the poor.

This is not an “either ... or” situation. It’s a worship and serve situation. We must worship to be fulfilled – we must serve the poor to be faithful. “Both ... and”; not “either ... or.”

Throughout the movie, *Amazing Grace*, which tells the story surrounding the slavery abolition movement in England and the writing of the hymn, William Wilberforce, who eventually leads

the British Parliament to end the slave trade in the Empire, struggles with whether his will use his considerable gifts – money and intellect and influence – to serve God as a clergy person or to serve his country as a politician. He finds that his does not have to be an either ... or choice. He figures out what we all need to know.

We are called to do both – to serve God and to serve our brothers and sisters – to worship God and serve the poor.

The Christian life is more than sitting in our beautiful church buildings worshipping God quietly and comfortably in a controlled atmosphere. If worship takes place only inside the church building and if service only takes place in the outside world, then we have missed the point of the Jesus message. The Christian life involves praise, prayer, proclamation, and practice, all as our response to God’s grace. Without one of those elements, our faith is false.

Worship is the unique action of the church which sets us aside from any other organization. Any organization can – and many of them do – serve people’s needs. There are social action agencies for any cause that you might imagine. But for us in the church, it is this unique action that propels us from this space out into the world to serve others. While a social agency might reach out to others from some altruistic humanitarian base, we as followers of Jesus are to do so because our worship creates for us a need to help others as a faithful response.

We have not worshipped until our worship compels us to serve and we have not truly served faithfully unless we are involved in the worship of God. We are the offering. Worship is incomplete until we have offered ourselves in service before God’s altar.

That’s the message of John’s Gospel. The question is not either ... or. We *must* worship God *and* we *must* serve the poor. That’s Jesus’ message at Bethany with Lazarus and Mary and Martha and Judas. Worship and service; service and worship. That’s

Wilberforce's revelation – the two do not need to be separated. In fact, they are truly inseparable. One leads to the other.

Here we are today – pouring ointment onto Jesus feet and wiping it off with our hair. Essentially that's what our worship is about, isn't it? That's what we do here every time we gather. But the real question is – what will we do when we leave here? What do we do today and tomorrow and next week and next year – how do we choose to serve those around us in response to what our worship demands as response?

Worship God or serve the poor? Either ... or is not the question. How and when is what we need answer.

Amen.