***Costly Gifts***

**John 12:1-8**

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**March 13, 2016**

Many of you will remember that I spent a number of years on the Gull Lake Community Schools Board of Education. This was a fascinating and rewarding experience, which has provided me with many stories to tell. I would like to share one with you today. There was a period of time when finances were very tight for the school. This necessitated funding cuts for many programs, especially those programs which were not tied directly to core educational requirements.

One such program was funding for non-curricular arts activities such as the Performing Arts Company and student art shows. While not necessary for core education, these programs contributed greatly to the lives of the students who participated in them. Unfortunately, these programs would have to be cut to maintain a balanced budget. At this point, an anonymous benefactor from the community stepped forward with the offer of a generous financial gift to continue to support these programs.

This gift was joyously received by the school. The arts programs would continue. End of story? Unfortunately, not. Much to the school board’s surprise, after the anonymous gift had been announced, at the very next board meeting a citizen addressed the board demanding to know the identity of the benefactor. This citizen expressed, “No one just gives money to a school.” The citizen felt there must be some expected *quid pro quo*, perhaps an expectation of influence over school district policies and programs.

Despite assurances from the board that the gift was without strings attached, the citizen was unsatisfied. Amazingly, for the next three months, this citizen joined by a few others continued to speak against the gift at each board meeting. The board remained unanimously resolute to accept the gift and that the benefactor would remain anonymous. A costly gift was given, with no expectation of reward, yet some people could not conceive of such an action.

In today’s Gospel text we see a story of a costly gift which was questioned. There are two other similar stories in the Gospels. In the Gospel of Luke (7:36-50) we see Jesus at dinner with some Pharisees. During the dinner a woman comes in, kneels by Jesus bathing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, and then anoints his feet with oil. One of the Pharisees objects to Jesus allowing this action because she is a sinful woman.

In the Gospel of Mark (14:3-8) we have a nearly identical story to that we just heard in John. In Mark’s story the woman anoints Jesus’ head with expensive oil rather than his feet. However, the complaint is the same, she is wasting money that could be used for the poor.

In all three Gospel stories we see extravagant gifts, graciously given, demeaned by someone who, for some reason, thinks the gifts are inappropriate. But were they inappropriate? In the story from Luke, the sinful woman responding to Christ’s message of forgiveness of sins, wishes to thank him with the best gift she can offer.

In the stories from Mark and John, the women anoint him in thanks for his service to humanity which will end in his death. They were honoring Jesus as the dying Lord. They do so with the best gift they can offer. Is a gift given out of gracious gratitude ever inappropriate? Love has its own way and gratitude knows no bounds. The gift to the school district was similarly given out of gratitude for the benefit the arts programs provided to the students.

To some people, the last verse in today’s reading sounds self-serving on Jesus part. In fact, it is often misinterpreted in more than one way. “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” (John 12:8). Remember the complaint against the gift was that it could be used to help the poor. Was Jesus simply saying, “Don’t worry about the poor so much they will always be here. On the other hand, I am about to die.”? No, indeed he was not!

Jesus was referring to Deuteronomy 15:11 when he mentions always having the poor. “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” In its context, this was more than a command, it was a condemnation of Israel for allowing poverty to exist. Jesus knew this.

In the context of today’s Gospel story ask yourself, “At that moment who was poorest?” Was it the many poor whom Judas was speaking up for, the poor for whom there would be many opportunities to give gracious help, if one were so inclined? Or, perhaps at that moment, the poorest was Jesus himself, who within a week would be dead, with no more opportunity for the expression of thanks and gratitude. A good act that can be done at any time should give way to a good act that can only be done now.

Jesus statement, “You always have the poor with you,” has been horribly misinterpreted among some Christians to excuse the lack of provision for the poor. People read it to mean that the poor should do more to improve their own lot. “Let them get a job, that will solve their poverty!” How is it that when the whole of scripture, both Old and New Testament, witnesses to the need, even obligation, to care for the poor, people take this one verse to mean just the opposite?

More generally, why is it we are so often suspicious of good acts, seeing in them some dark and nefarious undertone? Have we become so cynical of our modern world that we cannot believe in good acts? Certainly we have had enough examples of apparent good acts performed for all the wrong reasons. Apparent good acts done with an expectation of a *quid pro quo*. To be honest, I find this cynicism, all too often, in myself.

But is there more than cynicism at work here? Are there things within us, the way we are, that lead us to denigrate good acts and misread even Holy Scripture? Perhaps, those who choose to read Jesus statement about the poor among us, are expressing their unwillingness to share their own abundance with anyone else. Perhaps those who fail to see a good act as simply a good act, do so because they can’t imagine themselves doing such an act without some expectation of personal return.

To be a Christian means more than the outward displays of personal piety. To be a Christian means to continuously examine your own life and motivations, with the knowledge that we are all subject to sinful temptation. When we find ourselves acting in ways contrary to what God wishes, we need to ask ourselves why? What unrecognized internal need is compelling us to act in this way?

God loves us all. God’s intention for each of us, each individual person in all of humanity, is to live and flourish. To this end, God has provided many extravagant, good gifts to humanity. His will is that none of us should suffer. As the children of God, should we not emulate God and will that none should suffer? In the end of all history, God has promised the redemption of the creation, the end of sin, and an internal life of happiness. As the assured citizens of that coming kingdom of bliss, we should surely live out our lives as if that kingdom was already here.