

Around Christmastime each year, someone always revives a quote from one of Luther's Christmas sermons where he says that we all think we would have been more hospitable than the Bethlehem innkeeper and offered a better welcome to the holy family in their time of need; yet, Christ lives in our needy neighbors now, and it's not like we seize every opportunity to help. I thought of that sermon when I read this week's gospel: We always seem to notice when someone else misses a chance to be charitable, but we let many such opportunities pass us by.

Nowadays, it's nowhere near the top of the list of most popular boy's names, but somehow out of Jesus' inner circle, two of the 12 disciples were named Judas. So any time one of them is mentioned, John either specifies that he's talking about *Judas (not Iscariot)* or *Judas (the one one who would betray him)*—even chapters before Judas does this. John also accuses Judas of being a thief who steals from the disciples' common purse. So we already know that Judas is the bad guy when he tries to publicly shame Mary. But Judas picked on the wrong woman. Earlier in the gospel, when Martha complained that Mary hadn't pulled her weight with the housekeeping, Jesus took Mary's side. Here, when Judas criticizes her for what he sees as wasteful extravagance, Jesus flat out tells him to leave her alone. Whereas Judas will betray him, and Peter will deny him, and most of the disciples won't understand that he is about to be crucified, even though he has told them so over and over again, Mary seems to understand who Jesus is and maybe even what is about to happen to him, so she honors him with an expensive and personal gift.

This is one of several places where John's gospel highlights the abundance of God. Jesus turns water not into a little bit of wine but an obscene amount of wine. He takes a couple loaves and fish and feeds not a few people but multitudes of people, with leftovers. Here, Mary gives not a little gift but a lavish gift to the one who has always acted as a living symbol of God's abundance. However, Judas, a thief, doesn't trust God's abundance but looks at the world from the perspective of scarcity, believing there is never enough, always eager for more, angry or maybe jealous of the gift Jesus has received.

On the one hand, what Judas says is accurate: the year's wages that Mary spent on this perfume could have fed a lot of poor people. But as John points out, Judas was unlikely to spend all that money on the poor anyway. And just like in the parables, the one where the workers arrive in the vineyard at the very beginning of the day and get paid the same as those

who came to work last, and the one we read last week where the older brother resents his father for welcoming home the prodigal son, Judas, who is not generous himself, can't stand to see someone else be that generous. But for all of Judas' very practical suggestions for how to spend other people's money, Mary is the one who most closely follows Jesus' example—not just giving but giving abundantly—like gallons upon gallons of the best wine or lunch to feed thousands of people. Jesus accepts the gift of someone who gave just like he gave.

I'm not sure that Jesus didn't do a bit of a disservice for all of humanity that came after him when he tells Judas, "You will always have the poor with you." It seems some people, even some Christians have pointed to those words as an excuse not to help the poor. But it's far out of character for Jesus to have meant that there always *should* be poor people. Considering how he tells rich people to sell all their possessions and give the money to the poor, it just doesn't seem very Jesus-y to think that he says this to excuse us from helping people and challenging the unjust systems that lead to poverty. This is where Luther's gentle correction against judging the Bethlehem innkeeper comes to mind: we rarely have to wait long before we have a chance to help someone else, and in every person we meet, we meet Jesus. Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Judas wouldn't always have Jesus, but they would always have the poor who would need help. We live in a world that will always have poverty, not because it has to be that way, but because people don't trust the abundance of God that Jesus was always sharing. We always have the poor with us because our human society does not operate as God intended.

When we hear this same story from the gospel of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Judas' line regarding the perfume is "Why has it been *wasted*?" But how could there ever be a gift so big that it would be *wasted* on God? When we can find our way to see the image of God in other people, then we understand that our generosity to others can't ever really be wasteful either. Generous love to others is the gift we're called to give because we follow a God of generous abundance. As we inch ever closer to the end of Lent, to Holy Week, and to the cross, we see that Mary's gift of abundant love was her recognition and sign of gratitude for Jesus' ultimate act of abundant love. Mary rises above our human tendency to count the cost, which we sometimes do out of greed like Judas, or even just out of practical responsibility; but thankfully, our fear of scarcity does not get the last word. We might count the cost of loving others, but God doesn't count the cost of loving us. No matter how much mercy we require, our God thinks we are worth it.