

A NEW DAY
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5th Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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There has been and still is much grief in this place and in our hearts. It won't disappear anytime soon. One way to suppress or dilute grief is to replace it with anger. (Anger, sorrow and guilt are part of the mix that naturally comes in the wake of every death.)

Before this sermon is done, I will touch upon our grief again but first I thought a dose of anger might be helpful in displacing some of our sorrow. Which brings me to Glenn Beck who has enraged quite a few people of late.

By the way, I admire Mr. Beck. I admire him for overcoming a boatload of personal tragedies and afflictions to make something of himself. We can criticize and judge him all we want to, but I'm assuming God ain't done with him yet just as God ain't done with any of us. If there's hope for you; there's hope for Mr. Beck. Yes, I admire him up to a point; but, no, I'm not about to move to (what someone called) *Beckistan*.

Anyway, in case you don't know, Glenn Beck is a television host on Fox cable television. He claims to "fuse entertainment with enlightenment." He wants to save America from liberals and progressives—and now, apparently, from Christians.

In case you haven't heard, on his nationally syndicated radio show he recently urged any one attending churches that speak of "social justice" or "economic justice" to leave them. Not just leave, *but run; run as fast as you can and report that church to the authorities because, he says, "social and economic justice" are code words.*

Beck claims that advocacy of social justice is what communists and Nazis had in common. He could have included Judas, the betrayer of Jesus. After all, as you're about to hear, Judas was an advocate of economic justice.

My own father, may he rest in peace, would probably agree with Mr. Beck. My father was suspicious of churches that advocated or supported movements to help the poor. My father was the son of a Pennsylvania coalminer and worked on the railroad all his working days. My father also knew the Bible inside and out, from cover to cover. When I was a college student, he often rebuked me for participating in the civil rights movement. He usually cited one particular Bible verse found in today's gospel lesson.

Mr. Beck might have had this passage in mind as well. *The poor, Jesus said, will be with you always, implying, or so my father assumed, that it's useless to help the poor because they're always going to be poor no matter what you do for them.*

Listen to this.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii (about \$20,000) and the money given to the poor?" Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (John 12:1-8)

There you have it: an apparent slap down of Judas by Jesus for advocating economic justice. *Forget working for the poor*, Jesus seems to say. *Listen to Glenn Beck. Let's douse ourselves in luxurious perfume and champagne for we are blessed and the poor and needy have only themselves to blame.*

My father was sincere. I'm not sure about Judas' sincerity. Nor am I sure about Glenn Beck's sincerity since he prides himself on being an "entertainer." But, in any case, sincerity is not enough. Never was; never will be. Besides sincerity we need *informed* minds. But even that's not enough. Besides informed minds we need *transformed* hearts—hearts of love instead of hearts of stone.

An educated mind is not enough. Still, knowledge and education are good first steps for overcoming ignorance and prejudice. So here comes a little education about Jesus and Bible. Are you ready?

As it turns out, Jesus considered working for the poor, working for social and economic justice our most important work. According to the Jewish tradition, of which he was part, and according to the Christian tradition, which he inspired, working for social and economic justice is our true vocation. It must be done constantly but not ceaselessly as this gospel lesson suggests.

Here's a simple fact: The Gospel of John was composed by a first century Jew for people well versed in Jewish tradition and scripture. When Jesus said: *the poor will be with you always* that phrase would instantly link a Jewish mind to Deuteronomy, the fourth book in what we call the Old Testament.

It's like one of us saying, *The Lord is my shepherd*. What does that call to mind? (Psalm 23) Or, if I were to say: *We hold these truths to be self-evident*, what does that call to mind? (Declaration of Independence) Or, *Oh say can you see*. Or, *all you need is...* You get the idea.

The poor shall be with you always is out of Deuteronomy chapter 15. Can any of you recite it? (Neither can I.) Well, most Jews of that time could. Here it is.

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards them. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought or view your needy neighbor with hostility and thus give nothing; for your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. So, give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 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.' (Deut. 15:7f)

So you see, Jesus is not demeaning work for the poor. After all, it is the heart of the Jewish and Christian tradition. But he is saying that work, even the most holy work, is not the only or even most important thing for us at all times.

Quite simply: there are times to stop working and be fully present with those we love—to shower them with our undivided attention and sweet affection. We are mortal. We will die. Therefore, don't wait until they're gone. And if you should miss one opportunity, don't miss the next one right in front of your face.

Yes, we have lost and lost and lost many loved ones of late. No, we can't bring them back. But we can bring them into our lives and let their goodness transform us. Life has always fed on death. It's what the natural world shows us. Out of death and dead things new life arises time and time again.

Yes, we have regrets. Yes, we feel guilty. Yes, we kick ourselves saying: *shoulda, coulda, woulda*. Yes, we can dwell in the past if we want to. Yes, we can let fear of the future paralyze us. But, yes, we can also welcome a new day and say: *morning my morning new mercies I see*. (Great Is Thy Faithfulness)

Remember this because it's so easy to forget. Remember: *there's no time like the present*.

Out of death new life can arise today. Can you imagine it—the flower in the seed, the butterfly in the cocoon? (In the Bulb There Is a Flower).

One can't believe impossible things, Alice said.

I daresay you haven't had much practice, said the Queen. *When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.*" [Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*]

The Gospel of John is nothing if not complex. This morning, however, I want to keep it simple. *Mary was saving her best for Jesus' burial. But she had a change of heart. She didn't wait.*

Our best may not be a bottle of costly perfume. I'm guessing the most precious thing we possess is time. And some of us have put it in a bottle to offer later. Now is the time to open it.

Some of us have bottled up mercy and forgiveness. Now is the time to open that bottle, too, and let it flow into and out of your life. Let the fragrance of love fill your life as you greet the new day the Spirit is bringing your way.

And the house was filled with the fragrance of perfume.

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[As far as I know, my mother did not write many poems. Here's one she wrote after my father died in 1996. She wanted it read at her funeral. June 2006]

I would rather have one little apple
From the tree of a friend
Than to have the choicest flowers
When my stay on earth must end

I would rather have tangerines in
Kindness given to me
Than flattery when my heart is still
And life has ceased to be

I would rather have nuts and candy
From friends who stay so true
Than tears shed round my casket
When to this world I bid adieu

Bring me all your fruit today
Whether pears or apples red
I'd rather have a basket now
Than a truckload when I'm dead