

What is Always With Us
5th Sunday in Lent - March 21, 2010
John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4-14

The only things that are always with us are death and taxes. Oh, and the poor. Oh, and our sinful selves. Oh, and the fact that we always try the wrong things to deal with taxes, poverty, sin and death.

Death is the ultimate thing we can count on: *everybody dies*. But from miracle pills to cryogenic "eternity vaults;" from stunts that "cheat death" to cries for euthanasia that promise it on our terms, we try to deny, defy, or detour around death. Despite our 100% failure rate, *we keep on trying!*

Taxes are constant proof of that age-old notion: "If a little is good, more must be better." And in reaction to that, we've come up with even more ways of doing end runs around taxes than we have around death. Okay; we've also been somewhat more successful.

Jesus says that the poor are as much a constant in life as are death and taxes. They're not just "out there," though, as a drag on the economy or a problem to be solved; they are with us *always*. But, as with death and taxes, *we* often mess up *being with* the poor. We may ignore or demean them; or we may romanticize their lot or inflict well-intended aid without considering input *from* or impact *on* them.

Then there's "our sinful selves." Sin's "germiness" contaminates everything we think, say, and do - including our efforts to overcome sin! As usual, that doesn't stop us from trying. We may deny, excuse, cover up, or even re-define sin as virtue. We may do apologize and make restitution, which can lessen the impact of our sinfulness on our neighbors or even slow the spread of sin's "germiness." But these actions don't address the heart of the problem, nor set things right between us and God.

Our Gospel reading made me think about these things we "always have with us". For starters, this portion of John's Gospel is immersed in death. Jesus has recently raised Lazarus from four days of it; that miracle threatens to send Judea spiraling into a religious and anti-Roman frenzy. The religious leaders meet to determine how they can have *Jesus* put to death: "Better one man *die* than that the whole people *perish*." When Jesus eats with Lazarus, Martha and Mary, it's the day before Passover lambs are *slain*; the day before Jesus celebrates the *Last Supper*; the day before the day before *he is slain* on the Cross. Just in case we're slow on the uptake, he tells us that Mary's anointing is preparation for his *death and burial*.

However much we prefer to avoid thinking about, discussing, or facing death, Jesus won't let us. "You always have death with you?" I

hear him asking us. "Then until you face it squarely with me, you'll never comprehend what it means that I am the *Resurrection* and the *Life*."

Then there's pragmatic selfishness - which is a charitable spin on Judas' character and maybe even on taxes. Judas objects to 300 pieces of silver being spilled on Jesus' feet instead of into the coffers (supposedly for the poor but partly for Judas) - and then betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. It's easy to demonize Judas; but most people occasionally put practicality, self-preservation, or "the sense God gave a gopher" ahead of Mary's reckless generosity and overwrought worship. "I'm religious but I'm no fanatic," we might say. "This lavish display is nice, but we still got bills to pay."

Again, Jesus will have none of it. "You *always* have the poor with you," he says. "You've got the rest of your lives to care for them. You have bills to pay? Taxes? Obligations? Prudent decisions? They'll be there tomorrow. They're not going anywhere.

"But loving me can't wait."

In a few swift words, Jesus relativizes death, taxes (along with all the other practicalities that grease the wheels of life), and even the command by God to care for the poor. These are real, permanent, urgent concerns. But the problem with urgent matters is that we put them front and center. They crowd out what's *really* central, what's

permanently important. They prevent us, as Jesus earlier had told Martha, from attending to the "*one thing necessary.*" *They prevent us from hanging our heart on God alone.* And that is the crux of the matter; in the end, that's ground zero of sin.

See how Jesus deals with these apparently permanent realities. He doesn't wave a magic wand to make them disappear; he doesn't give us a sure-fire system for tackling them; nor does he say they aren't serious and real concerns. Instead, he uses them as the very means by which he will undermine, de-throne, and finally destroy them.

Jesus destroys death *by dying*. This One who told Martha that he *is* the Resurrection and the Life; this one in whose presence no corpse could stay dead; this One who is "true God from true God, of one substance with the Father" ... *dies*. He accepts Mary's anointing not only as a loving gesture, but as preparation for burial. All our ways of dealing with death are as inevitably futile as death is inevitably successful. Only when Death tries to swallow Life whole, and chokes on it, does the equation change. Only when we cling to Jesus in our own death, will death choke also on *us*, because it chokes on *him* once again.

What about poverty, practicality, self-preservation, and the sense God gave a gopher? Jesus, the Son of God, did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, a form of "wealth" to cling to. He

emptied himself; divested himself of the power and privileges of Godhood. He who was Lord of heaven's treasury became poor for our sake, taking on the form of a servant; a slave; a poor nobody. And to a repentant thief - alas, poor Judas; this one is called Dysmas and hangs not from a suicidal noose like you, but on a cross beside Jesus - to this *thief*, Jesus with nearly his last breath promises: "Today you will be *with me* in Paradise." *With me*. When *you* are utterly, resoundingly poor, divested of "house, goods, honor, child or spouse; when life itself is wrenched away," as Luther writes, then Jesus upends his own words, *the poor are always with you*. Now he promises, *today you are with me*.

And he upends them once again by so identifying with the poor that, since they are always with us in this life, therefore *in, with and under them so is our Lord*. "As you have done to the least of these...."

Then there's that inevitable existence of our sinful selves. It turns out that's the only entrance ticket we need to Jesus' healing, life-giving presence. All we have to do is *turn it in to him* - or more accurately, turn *ourselves* in to him. Sin and death - even more than poverty and taxes - are always with us. Nobody wants them; we can't lose them or give them away. They're always in our pocket. "Great," Jesus seems to say. "*These* I can do something with."

The early Church Fathers said something interesting about the stories of Jesus raising the dead. You may not buy it, but just think on it. They saw the three deaths - Jairus' daughter; the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus - as representing three stages of entanglement with sin -all deadly, but progressively more difficult to address. The little girl was recently dead, still on her bed; that symbolized sin that hadn't gone beyond the planning stage. The young man was being carried to his grave; that was like sin newly committed but not yet habitual. And Lazarus, entombed four days, his body reeking with corruption, symbolized the deepest enslavement to sin's deathly power. *Yet not only did Jesus call all of them from death to life, he called them from sin to relationship with him. There he sits eating dinner - with Lazarus!*

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock," the exalted Savior says to the lukewarm sinners who comprise the Laodicean church in the book of Revelation. After warning them to repent lest he vomit them out of his mouth, Jesus immediately adds: "As many as I love, I chasten; therefore be zealous and repent.... If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him, and dine with him, and he with me." Just as 4-day-dead Lazarus heard Jesus' voice, and came out, and now sits with Jesus at table, so it can be for anyone, no matter how heavily and apparently permanently sin and death - or poverty or taxes, for that matter - weigh them down. "Take *my* burden; it is light."

Is it any wonder, then, that Mary casts propriety and practicality to the winds, unbinds her hair and uses it to massage Jesus' feet with precious ointment? It's interesting about that ointment: it's called pure nard (nard is a plant-derived oil or ointment) - nardi pistici. And *pistici* - translated "pure" - comes from the Greek word *pistis* - meaning *faith*. *Is it not a lovely picture: the oil of Mary's precious faith fills the whole house with its fragrance.*

In the end, there's only one practical, life-preserving, filled-with-the-sense-God-gave-a-gopher response to Jesus as he transforms this whole sad business of death, taxes, sin and the poor always being with us. It's Mary's response of extravagant love, sweet faith, and self-forgetful gratitude. And if you're not quite ready to crack open a year's salary-sized vial of perfume, then at least learn these verses, based on St. Paul's words to the Philippians. *When I survey the wondrous cross/on which the Prince of Glory died,/ my richest gains I count but loss/and pour contempt on all my pride./ Were the whole realm of nature mine,/ that were an offering far too small./ Love so amazing, so divine/demands my soul, my life, my all.*

I pray that you will learn them *by heart* -as the offering of your heart, to this Jesus. For having conquered sin, death, poverty, taxes and anything else threatening to be with us always, he is the *only* thing, the *only one*, who *will* be with us always, to the end of the age. Amen.