

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
March 17, 2013

John 12:1-8
"The Judas Ingredient"

The gospel reading today is about congruence and poverty. It is John's final story before Jesus enters Jerusalem on the day we call "Palm Sunday" which is next week. Today is the last Sunday in Lent.

Why John highlights poverty now is anybody's guess. Perhaps it's a frame because the poor are mentioned by Jesus at the beginning and at the end of his ministry. Jesus says earlier: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor..." Anointing is there as well.

The passage today is also about Judas's character. He questions the wisdom of anointing Jesus' feet with costly ointment when the money could have gone to the poor. If you followed the text while it was read you will have noticed that John portrays Judas's character in parentheses.

It reads: "But Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus's disciples [parenthesis] (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" [parenthesis] (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.)

Judas Iscariot is one of the bad guys of the Bible. The worst is his betrayal of his teacher and friend, Jesus. But before we cast him too harshly we admit that there's some Judas in all of us. I call it "the Judas ingredient." When we think about stories like the one just read we eat a little humble pie.

Biblical scholar Jae Won Lee, in responding to this text, states: "If, while wearing a coat made in Guatemala or writing on a computer made in Malaysia, I keep silent about the economic injustice in our global village, I participate in systems that take advantage of people who are disadvantaged." ⁱ

I strongly disapprove of developing world factories where workers are under-paid and over-worked in dismal working environments and yet more than half of my clothes come from such factories. Am I stealing a good living from these workers? Do I say give to the poor when I keep my theatre subscription? Am I betraying the poor?

How unlike Judas am I? Jesus addresses the subject through the concept of congruence. Do my words and actions agree? Congruent persons are able to lead lives that are authentic and genuine – who they are on the inside is the same as who they are on the outside. Incongruent individuals lead lives that include falseness. Conditions put on them by those around them make it necessary for them to forego their genuine, authentic lives to meet with the approval of others. They live lives that are not true to themselves, to who they are on the inside.

It seems that Jesus in the passage today is somewhat incongruent. He has been a champion of the poor in his entire ministry and now he seems to dismiss the poor. He says: "Leave her alone. She bought the perfume 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."

It's misleading to interpret this passage literally. It is said that in stating that the poor will always be with us, he is thinking about an Old Testament passage familiar to him, Deuteronomy 15:11, which states: "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.'" Deuteronomy enjoins Israel to "open your hand to the poor," because "there will never cease to be some need."

In this sense, Jesus is congruent in that he identifies with the poor and he recognizes instances where people do special things for special reasons while it might potentially take finances from the needy. It's a matter of the heart. Mary's intentions are pure: she recognizes Jesus's special status, his kingly status if you will, by anointing him, and she will use the perfume for his burial which Jesus foresees and we commemorate in this season of Lent.

It's clear that Judas's intentions are not pure. He says keep the money for the poor when it is revealed that he steals from the very purse in which these funds are kept. There's a clear disconnect with what he says and what he does. He wants to give with one hand and take from the hand *before* he gives it.

Back to our dilemmas of being concerned about factories in China and wearing clothes made in China. At the San Francisco International Ocean Film Festival last week there was an amazing movie called "Into the Gyre" in which 34 scientists journey on an old sailing ship to map, collect and study samples of plastics caught in one of the circular ocean collection sites called "gyres." This was the Atlantic gyre east of the Bahamas.

With the ship in motion, a cone-shaped sieve is placed in the water at different levels and piles of plastic bits and pieces are caught and hauled in. Fish in the net are cut open and plastic bits are found in their stomachs. All along, different types of plastics are recorded and stored. Guess where they are stored? In plastic bags! A sea-stained and corroded plastic bucket is hauled in and placed alongside plastic containers used to sort plastic samples.

The lead research scientist was at the film festival for a Q&A and for personal discussion after the show. The question was put to her: Doesn't it seem somewhat incongruent that you are concerned about plastics in the ocean when you use plastics for your work and to store samples?

She answered: "Yes, that has been pointed out to us. Some people call us hypocritical but we use glass and metal when we can and on the boat plastic is the best for storage purposes and we use the same plastics over and over as much as we can and we use biodegradable plastics as much as we can. In other words, our footprint is very small and until we invent something better we use what works best.

I was part of a personal discussion with the scientist and while speaking one could see that she was happy because she knew that while she was compromising in this small way she was

making a genuine and huge contribution to society in this very field. Her heart was pure and her intentions good.

This is a thousand miles away from Judas who says avoid plastics at all costs and then he builds a plastics factory with the money he embezzles from Goodwill Industries. It's that clear.

Psychologist Carl Rogers was the first to write about congruence and incongruence. A summary of his theory can be read on Wikipedia. None of us can avoid a certain amount of incongruence he states. We can choose to live honest, integrated and congruent lives or we choose to be dishonest, false and incongruent. The latter, he states, leads to psychopathology and disease.

We all have some of the Judas ingredient in us – in the complex mix of our lives – and that's why we are members of a community like the church where we know we are in process and where we try to be who and what God wants us to be. I've said it a billion times: God ain't finished with me, yet.

In the first reading today, Paul speaks of a former life when he persecuted the church but as a Christian he aspires to be like Christ in sharing his suffering by becoming like him in his death, if somehow he might attain the resurrection from the dead. He goes on to say: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Jesus Christ has made me his own." (Philippians 3:1—12)

Paul makes sacrifices that lead to a better life for him and the world. So can we. And so, we move closer to the cross and resurrection. Amen.

ⁱ *Feasting on the Word*, Ed: David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, Year C, Volume 2, p. 143