

# Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections  
based on this week's lectionary readings

April 7, 2019  
Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C

The readings this week:

- Isaiah 43:16-21 ◦ Psalm 126
- Philippians 3:4b-14 ◦ John 12:1-8

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

## Costly: A Life Poured Out

What a contrast between the way that Mary and Judas approach life! Mary spends her time, focus, and resources on Jesus. Judas, on the other hand, is calculating and cunning in his suggestion of how Mary could have better used her resources, i.e. to give the money to the poor. On the surface his response might carry water, but the fourth evangelist makes it clear that Judas' real motivation is self-interest and greed. I don't know about you, but if a director was assigning parts for this little drama, I'd much rather play Mary than Judas. I'm pretty sure most of us would rather pour costly perfume on Jesus and see ourselves worshiping him extravagantly instead of acting like a greedy, selfish traitor that seems to be Judas' lot in life. But would we do so when it comes right down to it?

That perfume was worth a lot of money! By today's standards it would be worth somewhere between \$20,000 – \$30,000. According to the 2013 US Census, that would cover about half of the median family income (\$53,657). Put in those terms, would it really be so easy to pour that amount of money on someone's feet, even if those feet did belong to the Son of God?

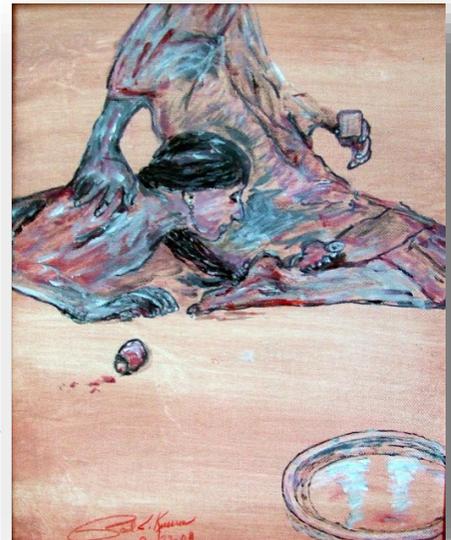
I can't get Jesus' response out of my mind this week: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." This response is all too often "cherry-picked" and misapplied to imply that Our Lord believes poverty is a fact of life, and so we are absolved from working to stop injustice and economic inequality. The entire biblical witness offers enough ammunition to obliterate that pitiful attempt to twist Jesus' teaching on social justice and water down discipleship.

In fact, one might make the argument that we don't really have the poor WITH us at all. Sure we may wring our hands at the global poverty we see in photographs or hear about in news stories, and these may inspire us to write a well-meaning (and much needed) check from our own abundance. But WITH the poor? How many of us live among and regularly share life with those experiencing poverty? How much of our sharing of resources is "transactional" rather than "relational"? Could Jesus be up to something else here?

From where the reading appears in John's gospel we know Jesus is heading for Jerusalem and that his time is short. Tensions with the religious leaders are escalating. Crowds who have witnessed his miracles are growing, and surely the poor and destitute are among them, if not the majority. Jesus is about to be handed over to a gruesome and shameful death because of humankind's sinfulness. As Word made flesh, Jesus is about to show how amazing is divine mercy and how uncommon God's sense of justice. It seems that Mary is the only one who truly "gets" the import of the events unfolding.

Mary somehow grasps the true meaning of costly grace and lavish love. She puts all that she has into her worship of Jesus on this night, even drying his feet with her hair — in that day and age a scandalous interaction between a woman and man not her husband. She becomes completely vulnerable, in a sense declaring her complete dependence on and allegiance to this prophet of an upside-down, inside-out way of being. She was all in for whatever was to come.

Can you smell that sweet scent of devotion, of a life broken open and poured out for Jesus? Can you calculate the cost of the grace and love and mercy in denarii or dollars, drops of precious oil or drops of blood poured out for you and for me, for this entire beautiful, broken world? Yes, the life poured out in service and in worship of Christ is a costly one. But so is the grace that sets us free to truly live. Go ahead: break yourself open and destroy the illusions that keep you confined and that cloud your vision. Pour yourself out in praise, prayer, and purpose. Live your one precious life in a way that leaves nothing held back.



# Reflecting on the Word



## 1st Reading: [Isaiah 43:16-21](#)

Does God change? What is helpful about looking in to the past when it comes to how God has dealt with His people? With how He has dealt with you? What is “dangerous” about looking in to the past? What is God’s command to the people in verse 18? Why would He tell them that? How do we know when we or someone else is “dwelling on the past”? How do we move out of that mindset into the here and now? How do you feel about change? What is your first response when your boss says there is something coming along “new” in relation to your computer system or processes at work? How do you react when you hear that there is a new iPhone (or whatever phone) coming out? How is new both exciting and frustrating? How do you think the people felt about God saying He was doing a new thing? How do you think the people in Jesus’ day reacted to the “new” way they would be relating to God? What changes did they undergo in the way they practiced their faith? How do you feel when it is announced that there is something new about to happen at church? What do we need to remind ourselves about the methods of presenting the Gospel and the message of the Gospel? [FBC Summit](#)

## Psalm Reading: [Psalm 126](#)

What does this psalm teach us about praise and prayer? What are the similarities between prayer in the Old Testament and prayer in the New Testament (in Christ)? What are the differences? If you were talking to a faithful Jew, what would you tell them about Christian prayer? How do we pray according to God’s will? What role does Scripture play in prayer? What part of Scripture motivates us best and induces us to pray with faith? What role does suffering play in prayer? How does knowing that prayer is meant to be a struggle help you pray, or keep you praying in difficult times? In what ways will you take steps to increase prayer this year? Personal prayer? Corporate prayer? Thankful prayer? Deliberate prayer? What are some immediate action steps you can take to grow in prayer? [Via Emmaus](#)



## Praying Toward Sunday

When we see  
the body of Christ  
still broken in this world,  
may we meet it  
with lavish grace  
and pour ourselves out  
with extravagant love.

~ Jan Richardson, [The Painted Prayerbook](#)

Mary understands that Jesus is to die, and anoints him with costly nard, as if for burial. She wipes his feet with her hair.

Jesus understands her extravagant gesture. It is if a wordless conversation of breathtaking intimacy takes place between them. Mary says, “I know.” And Jesus acknowledges - “I know that you know.” Mary, relieved, sighs, “Now I know that you know that I know.”

~ Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

## 3rd Reading: [Philippians 3:4b-14](#)

Why do you think we are tempted to start with ourselves when seeking “wholeness?” What are some of the problems with looking inside ourselves for the answers? Why do you think Paul cites his religious background? Isn’t this being boastful? With whom does it give him credibility? He calls these elements of his religious background “loss” and “rubbish”. How can his righteous upbringing be considered “loss” rather than just “rubbish”? What did Paul gain instead when he threw away the things he once thought worthwhile? The word “know” in verse 10 means to have personal acquaintance or experience with. What did Paul want to experience, and what did he seek to gain in getting more knowledge of Christ from the experience? What two kinds of righteousness does Paul talk about? What are the differences? What did Paul mean by “becoming like him in his death?” What sorts of things tend to draw you away from Christ? Why do we tend to base our worth as Christians on our performance? Explain Paul’s goal in verse 14. How can it also be our goal? [Redeemer Lutheran Church](#)

## 4th Reading: [John 12:1-8](#)

Have you ever received something of great value? What did that gift tell you about the relationship you had with the person giving it? When do the events of chapter 12 take place? How long does Jesus have before he is crucified and buried? What is the occasion that merits this gathering together for dinner? Is Mary doing something that is very common, or is her anointing of Jesus uncommon and extremely special? What does this single act of devotion by Mary indicate about her willingness to give Jesus her past, present, and future? Have you ever seen or heard someone react like Judas when someone has done something extravagant for God? Does their reaction tell you anything about their heart for Jesus? How long will this act of sacrifice be remembered? What does this tell you about the significance of this single act? What is the modern day equivalent to the love and devotion that Mary showed to Jesus in this story? What can you do to show your love and devotion to Jesus? [Eagle Christian Church](#)