

LENT 5C

March 21, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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

On December 25, 2002, Jack Whittaker of West Virginia won a \$315 million Powerball lottery, at the time the largest single lottery winning in U.S. history. Whittaker opted for the cash option, pocketing a cool \$114 million after taxes. Whittaker's legal troubles have been well-publicized and are legion. But they pale in comparison to the personal tragedies that have befallen him. First, his 17-year-old granddaughter was found dead from a drug overdose only five days short of the two-year anniversary of his win. Then, on July 5, 2009, his daughter was also found dead.

Evelyn Adams won the New Jersey Lottery in 1985, and then again in 1986. She has spent it all, and today lives in a trailer park. \$5.4 million, all gone.

William “Bud” Post only won the lottery once, but it was the Pennsylvania lottery, and when he won it, it was a total of \$16.2 million. A former girlfriend sued him for a portion of the money – and then some of his relatives – and then some others. \$16.2 million is a lot of money. And yet, at the end of a year, not only did he not have any money, he was \$1 million in debt. Today, he is living off of his social security check. That is all he has.

This story has been repeated so many times that it is frightening.

Poor people... people who have hardly enough to live on... strike it rich in a lottery. It doesn't take long, and they are poor again. Only now, they are bitter, angry and feel deserted.

Since the beginning of Lent, the dismissal in our later service has been these words: "Go in peace. Remember the poor." To which we respond: "Thanks be to God." I've spoken to several of you, and we've all been in agreement – these are troubling words. "Remember the poor" and "Thanks be to God"? These words are odd, dissonant, troubling.

Then in today's Gospel reading Jesus says, "The poor you will have with you always." Combine that with "Remember the poor" and "Thanks be to God" and I don't know about you, but my cognitive dissonance has risen to an unbearable level. This had become a nut I felt I had to crack for us in today's message.

While researching online for today's sermon, I came across a sermon on this text by my friend and mentor, Pastor Seibel. Some of you may remember him – he preached the sermon at my installation service. Many of the thoughts in today's sermon are his, and I thank him for helping to open my heart and eyes to this very difficult text.

I am troubled when Jesus says that there will always be poor, but then I think

about my own experience. There are those who will be poor no matter what is done.

Some of that is a choice. Some of that is because of things that they do, simply because they don't know better – something has become ingrained in them, that leads to them not leaving poverty no matter how much money they are given, like those lotto winners.

Then, of course, there is the fact that bureaucracies and society seem to create poverty – some places in the world are worse than others in creating poverty.

I remember my first visit to Jamaica. As our tour bus wound its way through the lush hills, with the tour guide pointing out the houses of the rich and famous on one side of the road, my eyes were glued to the opposite side of the road. There were little shanties, nothing more than a frame with aluminum panels nailed onto them, where whole families lived. They collected their drinking water in barrels. They cooked their meals over open fires. Within 100 yards of some of the most expensive houses I'd ever seen.

“You will have the poor with you always,” just doesn't seem right. It shouldn't be.

Hearing this then puts a pit your stomach – a reason to despair, and say, “Well they are always there – we can't fix the problem – so let's not do anything.”

But that is the exact opposite of the meaning Jesus had. Jesus, ever the good

teacher, was quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, 15:9—11. Verse 11 reads, “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.”

As this text from Deuteronomy helps us understand, Jesus saying “You will have the poor with you always” doesn’t dismiss caring for the needy. Rather, it points out that you have an opportunity to serve God by opening your hand by helping the poor – who are always around you. Seize the opportunity to serve when you see it!

+ + +

Then there is another kind of poverty. You may have even felt this kind of poverty yourself. This is the poverty of comparison. You look at your brother, or sister, or neighbor, and see all of the things that they have. It may be a nice new computer, or the new car that you wanted to get – but couldn’t afford, the vacation that they took... and you feel envy.

Yes, there is a way that you might feel like you are among the poor – even when you have enough to eat, clothes to wear, and a whole list of things.

So why say “the poor you will always have with you,” in this context?

Perversely warping these words has a long history. But let’s look deeper at it.

In his words, Jesus exposes Judas for who he is: Self-centered and a thief.

That is the real poverty here. Mary was not a wealthy person – but wanted to honor Jesus. She had an attitude of seizing the moment to serve... Jesus.

But Judas... Oh, Judas. He looked at the bottom line in everything. And the most important bottom line wasn't that of the whole group, but of his own pockets.

Follow the money. So many of those who claim to be about caring for the poor and the needy, aren't. They are in it for the acclaim. They are in it for their own purposes. They are in it for their own pocket book. They are in it for the power. They are in it because of another kind of poverty in their own lives.

Judas may have had different reasons when he first started out. Judas may have wanted to help his people when he first started as a disciple of Jesus. But then, he turned this all in on himself. And through that we see Judas' own real poverty.

He had a poverty of heart. He was a disciple of Jesus – but always thinking about what is in it for him to be there. Self-centered and self-aggrandizement are the motivators for the betrayal that was already being acted out in his life. This is the poverty that took 30 pieces of silver to turn Jesus over to be killed. But that betrayal was already happening. Disguising his real motivation, he pretended to care about “the poor.” In this he did not see his own poverty.

The one who was anointed was being prepared to die – not in order to fill that pit of self-need, but because of the poverty of the heart all around him.

This was a different moment – less than a week until Jesus would die. And no one else there knew what would take place. They were expecting much different. They were expecting the shouts of triumph we will read about next Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem with people singing his praise.

Aggrandizement – people were shouting for Jesus in joy.

But now Jesus knew this is what was being set aside. He was taking our poverty, this same poverty of the heart of Judas, this same poverty of comparison in our lives, and taking it all into himself.

Normally anointing was something festive. It was part of a celebration. And that is probably what Mary had been thinking. But Jesus knew better. This was oil in preparation for death. He was to be buried in a week.

But Mary was responding. Yes, she was poor financially. She had probably used her life's saving to buy this spice. But she felt a need to. She had to because on this day she felt wealthy. Her brother, Lazarus had died, and Jesus had brought him back to life. She was ecstatic. This was her response to that joy. It was an act of love and devotion. She wanted to celebrate the one who had now given her brother back to her.

Jesus acknowledged that she wouldn't always be able to show this kind of devotion. There would come the day – much sooner than they expected – that he

would no longer be with them physically. Lavishly, she poured oil on him from her sense of wealth. So much so, that the fragrance filled the whole house.

Not that much earlier, there had been the stench of death – when her brother was in a grave. But now there was the sweet perfume of life.

In one week, the stench of death would be permanently overcome.

Resurrection – death would no longer be the victor, because of Jesus. His death means our life. His taking our poverty means our wealth.

Yes, the costly perfume was for the preparation of death for Jesus. But it wouldn't remain so. Life would come about – the life that Jesus came to give you and me.

And because of that life, we know we are not poor – no matter our financial circumstances. Mary, who had little money, felt wealthy because her brother was brought back to life. We – you and I – are really wealthy, because we have been given real life.

We are in fact wealthy beyond our greatest imagining. We have the wealth of real life. We have the wealth that heals the poverty of heart that longs for self-centered survival. And we have the wealth that cannot be compared to any other.

Living out of that wealth, I invite you today, when you depart from this place, to “Go in peace; Remember the poor,” and proclaim in your heart, “Thanks be to

God that I *can* respond to the poor – the financially needy and the poor in spirit –
out of the wealth that Jesus has poured out for me.”

Amen.

<1,776 words>