

# In His Place

*Putting our hearts in Jesus' heart; our hands in Jesus' hands; moving beyond thinking into the realm of doing*

## *Seeing through Jesus' eyes*

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," Jesus said in response to Judas' condemnation of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. It's a difficult passage because it seems to say that Jesus did not really care about the poor, that it didn't matter that money had been "wasted" on perfume instead of using it to feed, house and clothe the poor.

Read John 12:1-8 paying close attention to what Jesus is saying in word and action.

Throughout this study two commentaries have been used, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* and the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary* from 1952.

The new commentary focuses on the perfume replacing the stench of death with the fragrance of love and devotion through Mary's selfless act. We are to see two sets of characters in opposition to each other Jesus and Lazarus and Mary and Judas.

Lazarus died and was buried, Jesus was warned to stay away from the burial site because of the stench. Yet Jesus entered and raised Lazarus from the dead. It is said that the perfume Mary uses on Jesus had originally been purchased for Lazarus but had not been used. So now Mary is using it on Jesus to prepare him for his crucifixion. Through Mary's love and devotion the stench of death is removed.

And it is also Mary's love and devotion for Jesus at the heart of her comparison to Judas. Out of love and devotion she pours out the oil on Jesus, Judas does not object to the oil based on his love and devotion for the poor but based on his greed — as keeper of the money purse he was stealing from the common purse that he controlled.

In the 1952 commentary, Mary wasting the perfume is compared to the church wasting money on buildings and celebrations instead of taking care of the poor. In Karl Marx's famous quote is the charge against the church: "Religion is the opium of the poor. ... to suppress religion, which provides an illusory happiness, is to establish the claims of real happiness."

And oddly, it is to Marx that Jesus ultimately responds: "You always have the poor with you,

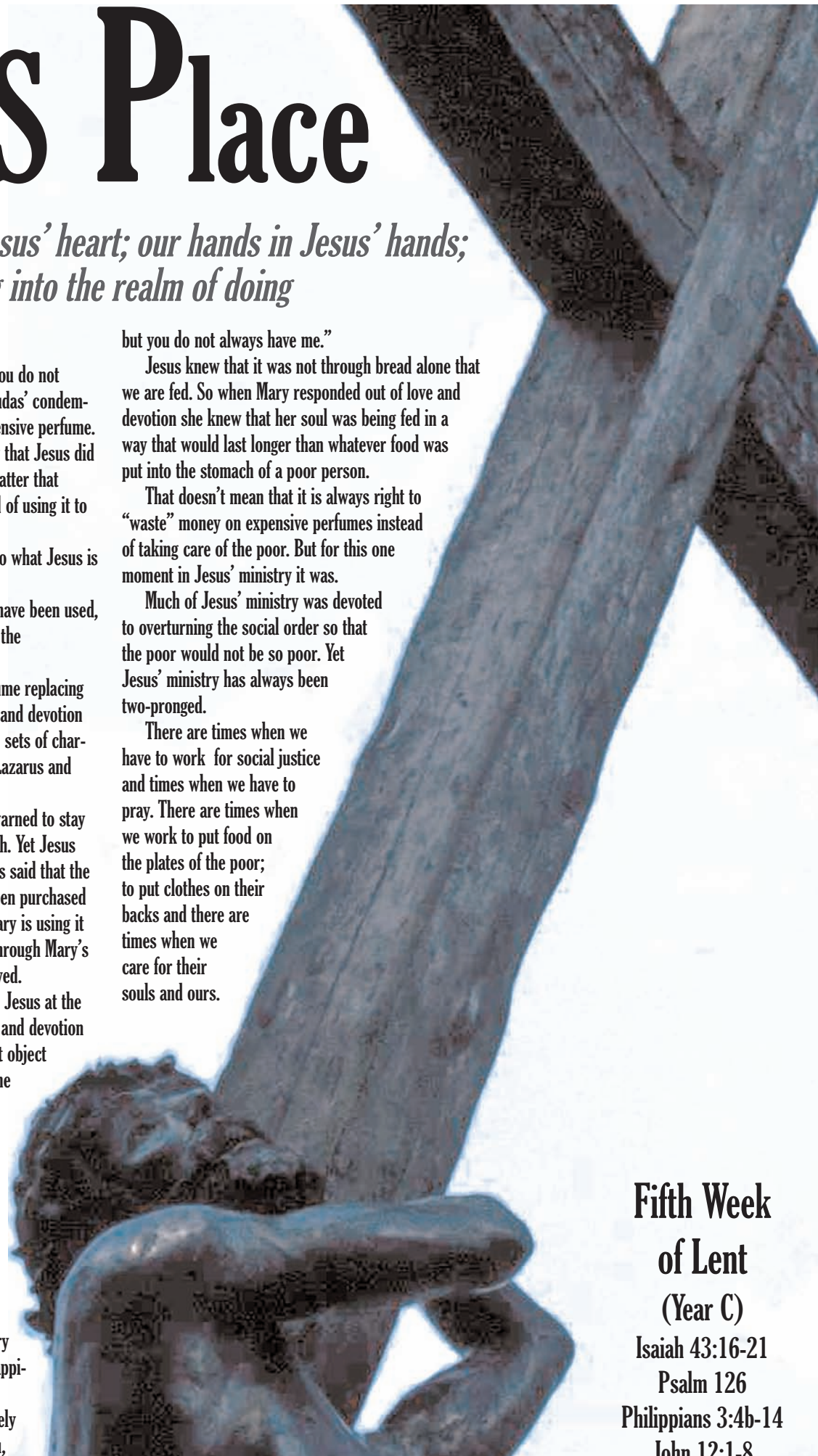
but you do not always have me."

Jesus knew that it was not through bread alone that we are fed. So when Mary responded out of love and devotion she knew that her soul was being fed in a way that would last longer than whatever food was put into the stomach of a poor person.

That doesn't mean that it is always right to "waste" money on expensive perfumes instead of taking care of the poor. But for this one moment in Jesus' ministry it was.

Much of Jesus' ministry was devoted to overturning the social order so that the poor would not be so poor. Yet Jesus' ministry has always been two-pronged.

There are times when we have to work for social justice and times when we have to pray. There are times when we work to put food on the plates of the poor; to put clothes on their backs and there are times when we care for their souls and ours.



**Fifth Week  
of Lent  
(Year C)**

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

# Taking a stand against the majority, law

## Isaiah 43:16-21

Most people when reading the Hebrew Scriptures are struck by two things: the family tensions and all the killing in the name of God. Many Christians differentiate the Jewish god as being a god of vengeance and the Christian god as a god of love. But that is too simplistic and ignores passages like this one.

James Wm. McClendon, Jr. in *Ethics: Systematic Theology* discusses the exodus from Egypt noting: "Their formative 'military' event was a withdrawal, accompanied by a natural disaster — the wind and waves — falling upon the pursuing Egyptians that God substituted for the military victories other nations have always looked to as their formative events. Subsequently, the people chose the way of military exploits, and heard the voice of God commanding them to those exploits, but in doing so characteristically forgot their origins, and the different pater (trust in God, not in arms)."

Furthermore the Isaiah passage calls us to a new way of thinking, we are told to turn away from our traditional way — the choosing of war over peace. Through Isaiah we are told "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" God is telling us that we are being directed to think differently so pay attention.

As Methodists we "reject war as a usual instrument of national foreign policy and insist that the first moral duty of all nations is to resolve by peaceful means every dispute that arises between or among them; that human values must outweigh military claims as governments determine their priorities."

President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his address to the United Nations talked about the cost of maintaining a military on the society as he looked at how the money spent on war could be spent on infrastructure like highways and schools. Eisenhower was not just a politician but had been the commander of Allied forces in World War II, the leader of the D-Day Invasion — who better to understand the costs of war?

¶ 165 - C Book of Discipline

## Becoming disciples

### Monday

Read John 12:7. How does that relate to Wordsworth's sonnet, "Inside of King's College Chapel, Cambridge": "Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore/Of nicely-calculated less or more."

### Tuesday

Read Matthew 5:9. With our nation at war, do we treat our peacemakers as blessed or as enemies? Why is it that we find it difficult to hear the voice of dissent when we are involved in war?

### Wednesday

Read Acts 9:1-2. Saul did not see himself as guilty or incomplete until his encounter with Jesus, yet after the road to Damascus experience he became Paul and went from the chief persecutor of the early church to its most successful missionary. How do you see this change taking place in you?

## Philippians 3:4b-14

I visited Ground Zero on Thanksgiving weekend in 2005 and at that time there were two things that I would have loved to gotten into a single photograph but was prevented by the construction fencing. The first was the steel I-beam cross that so many of us have heard about and have seen in photographs. But what would have fit in the upper right hand corner of the photo were window decorations in two windows. One was a peace sign and the other was words: "Dissent is Patriotic."

Paul was a follower of the laws when he was a Pharisee, he was so good as following the law that he was a persecutor of the early Christians. As Saul he was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, not in sympathy with the Christians but against them. He tells the Philippians that "as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ... For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith."

Growing up Saul learned the law and followed it to the letter yet after the Damascus road experience, he realized that being in relationship with God was not about the law. He was born anew as Paul and realized that faith lead to righteousness — Paul had to follow his conscience after regaining sight in Damascus.

"Governments and laws should be servants of God and of human beings. Citizens have a duty to abide by laws duly adopted by orderly and just process of government. But governments, no less than individuals, are subject to the judgment of God. Therefore, we recognize the right of individuals to dissent when acting under the constraint of conscience ..."

Sometimes dissent is not only patriotic but the Christian thing to do.

¶ 164 - E Book of Discipline

## Thursday

"What can I give Him,/Poor as I am?/If I were a shepherd,/I would bring a lamb;/If I were a wise man,/I would do my part;/Yet what I can I give Him —/Give my heart." — Christina Rossetti, "A Christmas Carol."

What does this mean to you?

## Friday

"We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world." — "Our Social Creed," paragraph 6, from Book of Discipline 2004, page 125.

## Prayer

### Morning

Dear God, sometimes when I see the poor I turn away because it seems that they are ever present. Help us to open our hearts to their situation. Amen.

### Evening

Almighty God, who offers us renewal when we are tired, help us turn to you with love and devotion for all of your family. Help us to stand against the powerful when our conscience tells us that they are in the wrong. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### Psalm reading

#### Psalm 126

Write down a phrase that sticks out to you in the morning and carry it with you throughout the day. Think about it when you can.

If you are doing journaling write your thoughts about the phrase at night.

Pick a new phrase each day.