

Many of you may remember the mid-1980s TV show, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, hosted by Robin Leech. It featured the extravagant lifestyles of very wealthy celebrities, entertainers, athletes, socialites, and business magnates. The show took a look inside the homes and purported daily lives of each person or couple profiled. The private yachts, airplanes, and houses or offices whose décor was billed as lavish, but oftentimes was over-the-top so as to border on garish, all fed an audience's appetite for more and more wealth. The show also fed imitations and criticisms of such "lifestyles."

Our New Testament reading this morning could be seen as a parallel of sorts to Robin Leech's "documentaries." At least from a viewpoint of the imitations and criticisms. This episode in Jesus' earthly life was recorded in all four versions of the Gospel story. They each tell similar events, having similar characters — there's Jesus, of course, and a woman who anoints him with a costly (read: extravagant) substance, and someone who objects to the "waste" of the anointing substance.

I've mentioned before how we can learn from the parables in the Bible by recognizing and identifying with their characters. It's not just the parables. One of the powers of Scripture — be the texts a direct teaching event or one of narration — connecting to the actions and words of the stories brings us into the Bible and into relationship with the true subject of those stories, God and ourselves.

Page 1

As *John* tells this story, there is a meal — not the Last Supper, but a gathering of friends and family at home. Perhaps we can relate to it as being similar to a holiday meal — say, Thanksgiving or a family reunion. As the meal is served (or maybe afterward), Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, comes to Jesus and spreads a perfumed lotion on his feet, then wipes off the excess with her hair. Here is where the story parallels that TV show I mentioned at the beginning.

I'm not sure if people have always been like this: some are attracted to wealth and extravagance (one might say, addicted), desiring to be like those whose circumstances — passively or actively — have put them in positions of economic success. And, some people — through jealousy, or genuine concern for others, see such ostentatious wealth and spending as wasteful, excessive, imprudent, squandering. These are the critics, the voices of worldly caution and parsimony and temperance. Fortunately, their voices, especially raised in genuine concern for others, are valid when those who have the means do not use their resources in ways that help people in need. Unfortunately, often there are those who then point back to Jesus' words about the poor and dismiss the call to help.

To repeat what I said last week, such texts in our Bibles are hard to hear and hard to preach. How can we work and save and provide for ourselves and our families when we know and see and hear of those in our community, country, and world who are in need? Do we turn our backs to them, circle our wagons, zealously protect our own so as to deny not only

Page 2

the need, but the people themselves? How do we use our resources for the good of God's kin-dom here on earth?

To wrestle with this question, we can look again at both of our Scriptural texts heard today. Jesus isn't callously saying that the poor don't deserve help. The acknowledgment is a bit subtle, but, yes, the poor are in need, and we should be helping them. Yet, Mary (and her siblings, Martha and Lazarus) has spent a significant part of the household resources in order to honor Jesus, to honor God in this way. We don't know Mary's intentions or motivations.

But, in looking at God's words spoken through Isaiah about the extravagant care for not only the creatures and plants of the desert, but also for the people in order that "they might declare [God's] praise," we see that criticism of Mary's act isn't pertinent here. Jesus himself corrects Judas' and others' thinking of the perceived waste; Mary's sacrificial offering was to honor God in anointing Jesus and thereby declare praise and thanksgiving.

How will we respond to all that God has done for us in, through, and as Jesus, His beloved Son, our Savior and Redeemer? Will we come to the Table where Jesus is host and still hold back what we have to offer because we are stingy, or are worried about worldly critique of what we say and do? Or, will we joyfully offer our gifts, extravagantly spending that which we have for the work of God's kin-dom in thanksgiving for what God

Page 3

has done and will do to bring peace, hope, grace, mercy, and love to all people — rich and poor alike?

This second to last Sunday in Lent challenges us to look at our motives, to examine our very selves, to consider our relationships with wealth, with other people, and with God. Such inward inspection is never easy. It makes for hard going at times; challenging perspectives we hold dear. But, let us look to ways that give God blessing and honor, that enlarges and makes visible the glory of God's kin-dom here in our world today.

**Let us pray:** O holy and ever-loving God, we want Your kin-dom to come here and now. We want to see all whom You call to be a part of it to be without need, without hurt or pain or want. Yet, we find it hard to give up that which we have worked hard to attain. We sometimes disguise such reluctance in pointing out the good such resources can do, but we still hold it back. Help us to see how such giving enlarges Your love; provides grace and mercy; enables peace and hope to flourish. Let our hearts be guided by Mary's example of honoring and praising You in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Your beloved Son, Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.