

**An Extravagant Act of Devotion**  
**July 23, 2017**  
**Caldwell Presbyterian Church**  
**Deuteronomy 15:11, Matthew 26:6-13**

Margaret found community with Caldwell.

Your mission team met Margaret last week at the Heifer Ranch. She's a sweet but somewhat socially awkward 15-year old. In her freshman year of high school, she had been bullied when leukemia radiation treatments took her long hair. But, now stronger, she courageously came with her church youth group from Kansas to the Heifer Ranch.

As the week progressed, it was clear that Margaret didn't exactly fit in with the other kids in her group. That happens sometimes with teenagers.

But then Margaret met Kalaura Jones, the youngest member of the Caldwell mission team. Margaret found an immediate friend in Kalaura, whose warm and welcoming spirit infects anyone she meets. Soon, Margaret was happily spending time on our hallway of rooms in the dormitory and easily engaging us easily in conversation as we walked the ranch or sat in the many educational sessions.

I'm sure that made Jesus smile, because Jesus did the same. He made the outcast, the sick and the marginalized **his** people. So it was one day when he was with his friends at the house of Simon the Leper.

We just heard Kimbo read the rest of that story. There is a lot in there. Knowing you as I do, I'm sure some stumbled over Jesus' words, "you will always have the poor with you."

As the story goes, an unnamed woman heard Jesus was in town. So she grabbed her most valuable possession – a jar of perfume worth a year's wages. After Jesus had eaten with his friends and was reclining next to the table, she astonished everyone. She poured all the perfume out on Jesus. From head to toe, she covered him. By today's standards, it was as if she had piled up \$30,000 and set it ablaze.

It's no wonder the disciples reacted the way they did. After all, the poor meant everything to Jesus. Anything that could relieve their suffering was required.

Indignant. That's the word Matthew uses to describe the disciples' reaction.

"Just think," the disciples said to her, their voices no doubt rising with tense emotion. "Think about what you could have done with the money you might have to give away... if only you had sold the perfume instead of dumping it all over Jesus."

Any of us might have thought the same. The value of the perfume was about what we as a church give to support the vitally important ministries serving the poor in Charlotte -

the Urban Ministry Center, the Men's Shelter, Crisis Assistance Ministry, Habitat for Humanity, Loaves and Fishes and others – along with direct support of our members facing economic hardship.

But Jesus had a very different reaction.

"Get off her back," he said in effect to the disciples, no doubt with a sharp tone of voice in her defense. "She has done a beautiful thing."

And then he said it, that statement that is such a head-scratcher.

"The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."

In the traditional interpretation of this passage, scholars points out that it comes toward the end of Matthew's gospel. It points to Jesus' death and crucifixion.

"When she poured this perfume on my body," Jesus explains, "she did it to prepare me for burial."

And indeed, while the other gospels include verses about Jesus' anointing at the time of his burial, Matthew does not. That's because *this* is Jesus' anointing for burial. Jesus gets it, even if his followers do not. Jesus knew this extravagant act was the unnamed woman's one chance to express all that Jesus meant to her. And she didn't hold back.

But that still leaves us with the issue of what Jesus said about the poor, that they would always be with us.

It begs the question: If they are always to be with us, do our actions count for anything? Is there nothing we can do ... nothing we are *supposed* to do ... about the one in six Americans who live in the mean estate of poverty?

Just forget the one in five children in the U.S. who go to bed hungry every night? Ease your burden over the one in three people in the world who live on less than \$2.50 a day?

Is that really it? Does Jesus negate everything else he said and did to teach us that the poor and outcast have always been first on God's mind? Are we to surmise that it's too complex, too intimidating a problem? Or it's just too depressing to have to think about?

Are we simply to chalk the plight of the poor up to human sinfulness and wash our hands of the matter, just as Pontius Pilate did when he gave Jesus over to the mob before they crucified him?

A personal piety, after all, is the easier way to go. Look after only yourself and let the poor fend for themselves. Is that what Jesus is saying here? Can it be so? Are the challenges of human apathy and global poverty too entrenched and irrevocable?

That is certainly not what your mission team heard last week at the Heifer Ranch. Heifer works in dozens of countries to teach sustainable farming and other ways to partner with the world's poor to help them pull themselves out of poverty.

This was our third youth mission trip, following a trip to witness and address poverty in Appalachia and another to do the same in downtown Washington, DC. This time, the team included youth and adults.

We learned a lot. We learned that the world produces twice as much as is needed for all of its citizens to have enough. As Heifer asks, "If there is enough for all, why don't all have enough."

The answers are many and complex. First of all, we waste a lot: as much as 30% of food in the U.S. is wasted in various ways.

We also consume more than we need. Americans consume far more of our share of the world's food and other resources. North America only accounts for 5% of the world's population, but we account for one-third of the world's private consumption. Meanwhile, Africa, with 16% of the world's people, accounts for only 2% of private consumption and Asia, with 60% of the world's people, consumes only 25%.

America's bloated consumption helps keep millions worldwide in poverty. We create demand for cheap produce and cheap products that come from workers who are paid peasant's wages. It's felt in the ruination of the environment and the degradation of long-established cultures of more vulnerable nations as unchecked capitalism has its way.

But these challenges are not too big to tackle. And that is what we discussed as the mission team debriefed all that we learned. Jermaine vowed to trade junk food for healthier options and model healthier eating in front of his younger siblings. Benjamin said he would start a garden to cut down on the importation of produce from other countries, where the producer receives only a fraction of a fair sale price. Rosabella said she would lobby her mother to buy even more fair-trade products at the grocery store.

Benjamin summed it all up well: "I'll never look at a plate of food the same way again."

We will hear more from the mission trippers themselves in worship next week.

So, someone might say that these are merely baby steps? They are. But they are the steps each of them said they would take to support a more just global economy, to lift up poor people on the other side of the world for whom they feel responsible.

And, these and other steps do add up. Since 1990, more than 100 million children's lives have been saved through vaccinations and improved nutrition and medical care.

Every day, another 250,000 people graduate from extreme poverty, which is living on less than \$2 a day. For most of history, more than 90 percent of the world's population lived in extreme poverty. But that is down now to about 10%.

Yes, we as a nation and as a world are advancing against the powerful forces that can keep people poor, though we have a long way to go.

What, then did Jesus mean, when he said “the poor will always” be with us?

As a peasant himself, Jesus spoke out of his experience. He knew the powerful Roman government was deeply invested in keeping the poor poor so the rich could be rich and the powerful powerful. And he knew the grip that sin and greed can have on people and on systems. And he knew that God's original covenant, made thousands of years earlier with the people of Israel, had yet to be fulfilled.

That covenant, proclaimed in the Ten Commandments and so many of the other ancient Hebrew laws, called for *shalom justice*, a wholeness of community where none was left behind, where all had at least enough, where those with plenty shared as a way of worshipping God, where the common good was not just a quaint notion but the very law of God, where systems were to protect the most vulnerable and guard against wealth accumulating in the hands of too few.

On the day the unnamed woman anointed him with the jar of expensive perfume, Jesus must have felt a deep sense of urgency. His days on earth were short. His followers needed to understand that they were about to inherit the job of bringing about the wholeness of community that is *shalom justice*. And so it did. And so the work continues, because the human creation that is poverty continues to disappoint God and call us to fix it

And maybe, just maybe *shalom justice* is not out of reach.

The heart of our experience last week at Heifer Ranch was a 24-hour period where we lived in the circumstances of the global poor. The group of 90, made up of churches from Minnesota, California, Kansas and North Carolina, was divided into nations for a night, all of them poor.

Some were dispatched to the same urban slum environment that 864 million people worldwide experience every day. Some spent the night in the bamboo huts of Thailand, others as refugees in a makeshift camp. Your Caldwell team was divided in two – some sent to a ramshackle settlement resembling the poorest of Appalachia, the others to a small brick dome with a thatched roof in would-be Zambia, Africa.

The anxiety spiked when it came to eat. Each “nation” group was allotted elements of what it would take to create a meal. Some got firewood, others water. Some a few carrots, others a few potatoes, still others some rice. The refugee camp received nothing at all.

The experience simulated the world we have created for the global poor. Some had more than others, but none could make enough of a meal on its own. Our choices were to eat what we had, knowing it would not be nearly enough and knowing that choice would leave others, particular the refugees, starving. Or we could trade our supplies and resources.

The adults were told to let the youth run the world. Preparing to sleep in the 95-degree heat in whatever housing we were assigned, we held our breath and contemplated going without dinner or breakfast the next day.

Then a small miracle came about. The youth, it seemed, had paid attention in the classes and other learning experiences that preceded. Not long after we occupied our respective villages, fleet-footed teenaged messengers came first from one village and then another. Spread the word, they shouted, everyone, everyone would bring what little we had and combine our resources. Whatever we had individually would be shared collectively. None would go without.

The adults relaxed, for a moment at least, and the teenagers got to work. They chopped the vegetables, started two fires for cooking and fetched water. Several Caldwell members played vital roles. A little while later, we ate. It was no five-star meal, but it was enough. It was as much or more than one-third of the world would have to eat that night.

The next day, our Heifer guides told us it often worked out very differently. Past groups had fought and stolen from each other. Some failed to start a fire and went to bed hungry. Sounds a little like the real world, doesn't it?

But, just this once, with one or two exceptions out of the 90 people, all had enough by global standards.

So is this story from Matthew about one woman's demonstration of love and care for Jesus, her anointing of him before his death? Or is it a cautionary tale about how human sinfulness, heartless choices and corrupt systems will always punish the most vulnerable? Is it one or the other?

Perhaps is not an either/or choice but a both/and commandment. The unnamed woman loved Jesus in an extravagant way in his final days on earth. Our faith requires each of us to love the risen Christ just as devotedly, and we can do so by unfailingly working toward the wholeness of community that is shalom justice.

Isn't that how we bring our own extravagant act of devotion to our triune God?  
Thanks be to God.

Amen.