

**The Bethel Pulpit**

**Pastor Jerry Tews**

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 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: John 12:1-8

“Our Moral Compass”

We look for guidance in so many different ways regardless of our age. We keep track of our physical numbers so we can focus on the needs of our bodies. We have speedometers in our vehicles so, if we choose, we can move safely in traffic. We pay attention to school counselors to guide us toward future educational and life goals. We mentally if not physically keep our family members and friends in our minds so that we can be aware of either needs or celebrations that might be happening to them. We pay attention to what is happening in our country or world so we can be “in the know” and respond if we can. So many different ways we use so that we maintain focus in our personal lives, and stay in tune with our personal goals and our relationships with others. Question for us today is where do we look for maintaining our moral focus, where do we look so that we are making God pleasing day by day decisions that keep us or lead us in the right direction in our lives?

Today’s Gospel lesson is full of a lot of good guidance for us. In fact, it is really too full. If we are looking for guidance as far as discipleship is concerned, we have Judas’ form of discipleship set off against Mary’s. For guidance in life and death matters we have the sweet smell of Mary’s expensive perfume offsetting the stench that could still be remembered when Lazarus came out of his tomb. If we need help with greed and lying, we have both issues rearing their ugly heads as Jesus was enjoying a dinner with close friends. And we have the reality that it is now only 6 days before the Passover which would begin the most holy of holy weeks the world has ever experienced, something we are heading toward celebrating shortly. There is much “good guidance” in this Gospel lesson helping us make healthy day to day decisions and leading us in right directions in our lives.

To guide us today in maintain or resetting our moral compass I would like focus today on the last statement of the Gospel where Jesus makes the statement “You always have the poor with you but you will not always have me.” I believe that this statement can provide guardrails or boundaries helpful to us to avoid moral accidents and teach us how to deal with what we have in life, and how to treat one another in life.

Confession is good for the soul we say so I will acknowledge that the study of the Greek, the language of the New Testament, was not my strongest suit when in seminary. So, I take it from others more learned than me that the statement “You always have the poor with you” can be translated in two different ways. It can either be in the indicative form which simply states a fact, or it can be in the imperative form which gives a command. “The poor you will always have with you”---“Always have the poor with you.” Catch the difference?

There is no question in my mind that I am much more comfortable and comforted with the indicative form by simple taking Jesus statement as a fact--“the poor you will always have with you”. Speaking honestly, this fits the way the natural way I tend to look at life and it also comfortably fits the way I understand life to have been in the past and will probably be into the future. The poor are simply a part of life. When I look at the poor in this way, I am left free to live my life as I choose, act as I want--it does very little to help me maintain or, if needs be, reset my moral compass.

However, the statement “Always have the poor with you” creates quite a different impact. While it does not imply that I will always be in direct physical contact with the poor, having the poor and an alive awareness of the poverty in the world around me forces me to think about, and even hopefully confront, how I deal with my accumulations, my conversations, my celebrations with the ones I love, and for sure my prayer life. “Always having the poor with me” can reset, sharpen, inform, and direct my moral compass.

Having the poor with us always is a foundational piece of our faith. It is the centering piece of our moral compass as we remember that it is impossible to separate Jesus from the poor. Jesus consistently challenged oppressive political and social systems that did not address the needs of the poor, the disadvantaged, the outcasts, and the marginal. Being responsive to the needs of the poor is how he lived his life and is what he taught his disciples. The disciples as we know were certainly not the elite of society, possibly quite challenged financially, but even they had a treasury meant to help the poor. This is what Judas was using in his argument for not pouring what amounted to a year’s wages for a common laborer on Jesus feet. “We can help out the poor with that much money” was his false and lying claim.

The prophet Isaiah shared with us in our first lesson that God was “about to do a “new thing” for the world and that new thing came to life in the person of Jesus. To be about God things in our lives, to have our moral compass in tune with God’s, means to be looking at the world through Jesus’ eyes. And for him “always having the poor with him” set him about doing his Father’s will in his life.

Thank God he did keep his eye on the poor, caring for them for that means he has his eye on you and me and is caring for us. God loves us for the person we are right here and now not the person we or others think we should be. And in that love, he calls us to follow him.

This is not easy. Recently I was in a discussion about the lines we draw between ourselves and those different than us. From across the room a friend said, “Remember Jerry, whenever you draw a line between yourself and others, Jesus is probably on the other side!”

Jesus is always about new things in our world. Today we can once again commit ourselves to being a part of that what is new by keeping the needs of the poor in our minds, our eyes, and our hearts. This, I am confident with help me and perhaps you maintain or if needs be reset our moral compass. May God’s blessings abound. Amen.