

*Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?" He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)*

*Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

Negativity bias is our very human tendency to not only focus more easily on negative stimuli, but dwell, sometimes way too long, on those events. Scientific research, well-documented since at least 1931, shows that we are hardwired to recall insults better than praise, remember traumatic events better than positive ones, and pay attention to the bad things that happen, eventually overstating their true importance. Think about it... I'd imagine we've all been in situations where we hear plenty of praise, and what we focus on are the one or two hesitations.

Years ago, I joined my two colleagues and best friends in presenting our version of project based learning, including a room-sized Rube Goldberg machine and an immersive, deep dive into the Harlem Renaissance including poetry, music and art to a school of strangers in Western Massachusetts. We received over 80 feedback evaluations, and I remember two of them. The one that said "seems overly simplistic" and the one that said "you guys clearly believe in what you're doing, but I don't quite buy in". Two out of 80, relatively benign, yet at the time, they were all we heard.

It's no surprise, then, that even though the Bible has over 300 verses answering the call to poverty with generosity, even though Jesus time and time again walked with, and sided with those on the margins, even though this very passage clarifies that Judas had clear ulterior motives...it doesn't even hint at it, it states it in black and white...we look at Jesus seemingly selfishly accepting an extravagant gift, downplaying helping the poor, and we say "whoa". For some reason, this stands out.

I can see why, and it goes even beyond our human penchant for zeroing in on the negative. We are a church that gives 10% of our entire operating budget to help alleviate food insecurity, homelessness, refugee and migrant assistance, and to promote justice in many forms. Last year, that was nearly \$21,000. Many people in this room have devoted entire lives to walking with and supporting those on the margins, following in the path of Jesus. I don't pretend to know what everyone thinks, but I am curious enough to ask.

Borrowing a practice from Rev. Thew Deen of Newfane, who frequently incorporates congregational discussion into the Gospel reading,

When you hear Jesus respond to “Why was the perfume not sold and the money give to the poor with “you’ll always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me”, What do you think?

(discussion)

I don’t think Jesus and Judas switched places here, nor do I think this was Jesus’ gotcha moment...like being accidentally caught on a hot mic. It goes beyond being tired, increasingly frustrated, and preparing to die.

Now, there are certainly times in which he showed his humanity. In Matthew 21, returning to the city hungry, he finds a barren fig tree, curses it, and the tree immediately withers and dies. Yes, the same Jesus who preaches patience and one more year of compassion in the context of fig trees also kills one. In a devotional on the subject, Professor and pastor Mary Luti offers this explanation:

“You read that right. Jesus cursed a fruitless fig tree. And it died. But wait, didn’t he tell the gardener to tend it, then come back to see how it’s doing in a year?

No, that’s a different fig tree from a parable about how patient God is. Here, apparently, Jesus isn’t.

So, what IS going on?

Well, some people say it means Jesus will damn us too, if we don’t bear fruit. Or, horribly, that the cursed tree represents Jews who rejected Jesus. Or that it’s about faith. If you had it, you could move mountains. Or kill a tree.

Are you liking those interpretations? I’m not. No way around it: Jesus woke up ravenous, looked for figs, didn’t get any, got mad, and blasted away. No good news in that.”

24 hours after flipping over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, telling them that they had turned a house of prayer into a den of robbers, being disappointed and enraged at the way manipulative and money-hungry people were taking advantage of the poor, it’s understandable that Jesus might have just been hangry.

In that moment we see a glimpse of Jesus, fully human and fully divine, having a human moment of disappointment and anger and lashing out. He was hungry, he wanted figs.

“You’ll always have the poor”...that’s something different. It goes way goes beyond frustration. By making an example out of something so close to his heart, so essential to his ministry, Jesus speaks to the depth of our ability to give to something bigger than us.

It speaks to radical generosity, where we are inspired to dedicate our gifts, and our capacity and call to build ourselves up so that we may be inspired to give it all away. To give simply yet deeply, with nothing expected in return. Mary of Bethany anoints him with nard worth the modern day equivalent of a year’s wages, at roughly minimum wage. Think about the incredibly generous gift of someone who earns \$150,000 annually making a gift of \$29,000 to a cause in which they truly believe...and then think of Mary doing that in one evening...with nothing expected in return, foreshadowing Jesus making the very same gift of his life.

In a recent Misquoting Jesus podcast, scholar and author Bart Ehrman inquires whether or not there is actually such a thing as true altruism. Ehrman describes several reasons for giving, all generous yet with some sort of reciprocal benefit, whether it’s status, power, or just making ourselves feel better. He gives an example of a soldier who gives their life to protect those around them, making the ultimate sacrifice, and then very gently yet still uncomfortably introduces the idea that even then, one might make that choice guided by religious beliefs that promise a better afterlife for self-sacrifice.

In the Greek and Roman traditions, there was plenty of giving, but mostly within known circles of friends and families. Jesus, Ehrman argues, instead brought a radical concept of giving, and that was to extend the benefit of generosity to absolutely anyone in need. Anyone. With nothing expected in return.

Maybe the answer is not in what Jesus explicitly said, but what we can easily infer from the rest of his teachings. You’ll always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me, and from everything I’ve taught you, when I’m gone, continuing to take care of those on the margins will still be your call.

Given that logic, he dares us to follow Mary’s example and give generously, give unconditionally and give fully to Agape, to the the covenant love of God for humans, as well as the human reciprocal love for God, because without Jesus on this planet to

perform the miracles, to provide blessed abundance, to feed 5,000 hungry souls with five loaves of bread and two fishes, we're going to have to create the miracles ourselves, and we certainly won't get there one small gift at a time.

Build an empire of love, and give it away unconditionally.