

## The Dinner Party

Have you ever been to a really bad dinner party. Like, really bad. One where the guests won't eat your food - maybe they even insult it!

Or the host spends the whole evening bragging about the impressive people they know and business dealings they are part of.

Or someone has too much to drink.

There's always the classic American dinner party nightmare of the crazy Uncle who ruins Thanksgiving with inappropriate jokes.

Well, here's a dinner party that's worse than any of those.

Imagine someone has done your family a really big favor - literally saved the life of your brother - so you invite him over for a thank-you dinner. He arrives with his friends - which is fine because they are a package deal and you were expecting them.

You cook a nice meal, your now-healthy brother is there, the mood is warm, everyone is feeling grateful. So grateful, in fact that your sister has splurged on some rare imported oil and while everyone is watching she lavishes it on the guest of honor. Now, at our houses, it might be strange to pour oil on your dinner guest, but for this crowd it is a sign of respect and honor of the greatest magnitude. It might be like breaking out the champagne you've been saving for a big celebration.

Just when everyone is feeling the love, one of the guests ruins it. He trashes your sister's fancy gift and says her money could have been put to better use by giving it to the poor. And then the guest of honor, who you really admire because of his wisdom and his compassion, says, "First of all, leave my friend alone. And second of all, you'll always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me."

Mood. Killed. Some people just cannot let a good time go unspoiled.

This story is, of course about the dinner party Mary and Martha of Bethany gave for Jesus soon after he raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. The one worried about the poor, the one who couldn't let a good time go unspoiled was, of course, Judas. And the one who said the poor would always be with us and he wouldn't always be with us was Jesus.

I wonder which part of the friction at this dinner bothered you the most? It's clearly upsetting that Jesus refers to his death. We know how this story goes from here- toward Jerusalem and the cross. But do the people in the room? What a way to find out!

Maybe it is because I do know the story that the comment about the poor bothers me more. After all, a huge part of Jesus' earthly ministry, teaching, and preaching is about serving the poor, lifting them up, seeing their humanity. How am I to take this comment that seems to place their needs behind an extravagant show of love for just one person - even if that person is Jesus?

And, because I know the way the story ends, I also know how these words have been used to keep the poor poor. These words of Jesus, "You always have the poor with you" have many times been used to say that poverty is inevitable so we might as well focus on other things.

Well, I don't think that's what Jesus meant at all - it goes against the whole scripture he came to fulfill. I'm also betting that the people in the room at that super uncomfortable dinner party knew what he really meant.

The first clue is where they are: Bethany. Bethany means "house of the poor."

Judas and Jesus have this face-off about how to treat the poor in a town called the “house of the poor.” So Jesus is speaking his words about the poor in the town of the poor. He is with the poor, the poor are with him.

And the second clue, which those in the room would know but we might need help remembering, is that Jesus didn’t make these words up as a comeback to Judas. He was actually quoting a passage from Deuteronomy that was specially about how to treat the poor.

Deuteronomy chapter 15 describes the traditions of sabbatical and jubilee, which were the means by which the people of God addressed poverty. Every 7 years, according to this tradition, the people of God forgave the debts of everyone so that, “there will be no one in need among you.”

There were no mortgages or credit cards in those days; the debt people accrued in the ancient world covered the costs of living and fees charged by the government. Between the time of planting and the time of harvest, for example, people borrowed money buy food and get drinking water then paid it off when their farm yielded its crop. If the weather was bad or they got sick they stayed in debt for another year.

During the time between Sabbath years, everyone who had enough to share, did so. Farmers left crops at the edges of their fields for the poor to glean. (Which we read about in the story of Ruth.) Animals sacrificed at the Temple were used at shared meals with the poor.

The logic of this tradition is that God provides and we can share. God provides the land, so we share the fruit of that land with those who need it. And there will be those who need it. The passage says, “since there will never cease to be some in need

on the earth, I therefore commend you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'

This is the passage Jesus quoted.

There is an important difference between the way Judas suggests addressing poverty and the way Jesus does. We are told that Judas is a thief and his concern for the poor is not authentic - but even if we take him at this word, what he is advocating is a system in which some people earn or acquire wealth and then give a portion of that wealth to the poor. This way of addressing poverty doesn't end it, it relies on some people to choose to donate and other people dependent on those donations. There is no way out of poverty and any relief from it is contingent on the voluntary generosity of donors.

That sounds really familiar to us, because that is the way, by and large, we address poverty in our society today. If that is what Judas is advocating, then how is Jesus' idea different? Or better?

What Jesus reminds his friends - and especially Judas - is that if you observe the plan God has set out, there will be no lifelong poverty. Poverty exists because we have not followed God's commands.

When Jesus referenced the Sabbath and Jubilee traditions, he and everyone in the room knew the whole passage. They knew that it was not God's plan for the poor to rely on the sale of our expensive perfumes in order to eat. God's plan isn't for us to give from our largesse, it is to give from God's largesse. We are supposed to set up our society in such a way that this happens.

Because the poor will always be with us. After you forgive all the debt in the land, there will again be widows and orphans, famines

and wars. So we forgive the debt again. And we feed the hungry and shelter the vulnerable.

What God asks of us, expects of us, hopes for us is that we establish justice, not charity. And we don't have to - indeed should not - engage in charity at the expense of worship. Because it is only by acknowledging our God that we will be pointed in the right direction. Generosity is not an either or choice for people of faith - God's generosity to us begets our generous return of that generosity to God and to each other.

What does this mean for us? As Christians, we honor Jesus with a dinner party every Sunday. This dinner party - the Eucharist - is in a place like Bethany, it is the house of the poor and yet a place of great generosity. In this house of the poor, we offer the very best we have, wine, bread, and our very selves to this Jesus who has literally saved our lives.

We are not going to sell the candlesticks and vestments to give money to the poor. Instead, we're going to use these special things to remind us of how blessed we are, how much God has done for us.

And then, because God has been so generous to us, we CAN be generous to others. All others. Especially those who are having a hard time being generous to us. We can take from this dinner party the reminder that we can aim for justice instead of charity.

The poor will always be with us. And so is Jesus. So we will open our hand to share what God has given to us all. We will go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Amen.

