

It is sometimes dangerous to call Biblical stories drama, because it can make us look at them from something of a distance, analyzing the stories like an English Major with a term paper due. But it is hard as we approach Holy Week not to see the drama building. Jesus is journeying towards Jerusalem. He made it be know a few weeks ago that Jerusalem is the place that kills the prophets. And today we find him in Bethany, which is basically a suburb of Jerusalem, being located about 1.5 miles to the east of Jerusalem on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives. In a few weeks the Mount of Olives will again become important, as it is the place from which Jesus will ascend to heaven. But for today Jesus is at a dinner party and at this dinner party we read, "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'" John adds a little editorializing after and says that Judas only said this because he wanted to steal the money. Whatever the case, we see the drama building between Judas and Jesus, with Judas chastising Jesus about how this whole Son of God thing is supposed to work.

But let's step back for a minute and ignore the potential kleptomania of Judas and the tension between these two characters and reflect for a moment on the question that is raised by Judas and that question has to do with the allocation of our resources. Judas is saying that anything excessive should be given to the poor. The answer that Jesus gives to this objection comes in the context of the larger drama. He is going to be crucified and so he chastises Judas by saying, "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." If we want to look at the commentaries (and who doesn't) we read that this act, quote, "Reminds the disciples of the limited time of Jesus' presence among them and the urgency to respond to Jesus while he is still here. Mary has recognized this limitedness and responded to it."

And that seems a good interpretation, but what I want to do is take this story and mix it together with Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative and I promise that this will be just as exciting as it sounds. For while I am sure you are all familiar with Kant's categorical imperative I thought I might just reiterate it a little so that it is fresh in your

mind. There are actually three imperatives but we are just going to go with number one, which states, “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.” Put another way this says to only do things that you are comfortable with becoming something that everyone is obliged to do. So for example, you are in the Louvre in Paris and are gazing at Gericault’s *Raft of the Medusa* and suddenly decide that it would look nice in your living room. So you decide to drop it down the front of your pants and bring it home with you. But if you are a disciple of Immanuel Kant you would ask yourself the question before you did any of this of whether or not you would be comfortable living in a world where everyone is allowed to take things because they really like them. In other words would you like to live in a society where there was a law that says if you like it, take it?

Okay with that out of the way let’s return to this debate between Jesus and Judas. What I want to do is see if we can create a universal law based on this discussion. In the debate between indulgence and altruism, if there is a categorical imperative that we can create from these two conflicting uses of resources? Or put another way how much are we meant to spend on ourselves, how much on God and how much on the poor? Judas makes the argument that there is no room for indulgence, anything extra must be given to the poor, but Jesus suggests that God takes precedence. But which side wins? If we made a rule from either Jesus or Judas we would either give everything to the poor or everything to God but does that make sense? So let’s do what it is we should do when in doubt and look a little more in depth at what Jesus is telling us.

Jesus seems to allow room for us to use our resources on any of the three possible categories –ourselves, God or the poor. It is just dependent on the context, suggesting that we cannot come up with a hard and fast rule. Which means we may have to get rid of Immanuel Kant. And the reason is that the Christian life needs to be more animated by love than it is by law. In the moment when Jesus says that he will not always be there he is saying that there are times and places that are appropriate for different allocations of assets. In the Book of Ecclesiastes we hear this famous verse, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to

mourn, and a time to dance.” It goes on for a while longer and you can listen to the Byrds *Turn, Turn, Turn* if you want to hear the rest. But the point the author is trying to make is that there is a time and place for everything, and that the art of living in communion with God requires us to discern when those times are.

Years ago I read an interview with the author Michael Crichton who wrote *Jurassic Park* among many other books. He said something that I thought was odd at the time about the scientific method. He predicted that in the next century we would reach a point where the scientific method will have run its course. I don’t know if I would go as far as him, but I think what he was getting at is the amount of things that can be declared with absolute certainty is limited and that a lot of our life is lived in nuance. So while I could easily say that 10% of your resources should be given to the Church, 6.3% to the poor and the remaining 83.7% can be spent on yourself, I don’t think that works, because it really comes down to priorities and our relationship to God. And here is the point where I will get preachy. As the Episcopal Church has fractured in the past decades a lot of it has happened because of a lack of nuance. The sides that have split have happened largely based on the answers to a few questions – are you for or against women’s ordination? What do you think of homosexuality? And based on responses to these questions we decide who is in and who is out. Judas today presents a similar rule – all excess must go to the poor at all times and in all places. If you don’t do this you are wicked. But Jesus points out that there are times when this is not the case. In our present trouble we have used differences on a few questions to trump the animating force of God, which is love. And love is not always reasonable or does it fit well into certain sets of rules. We may not always agree with others and they may in fact be wrong, but we cannot stop loving them. Jesus today points out that we must first love God. And this is not because he is a narcissist but because he realizes that we cannot love others fully unless we first love God. Life is full of odd situations that do not lend themselves to rules, but if we first love God then we will have an easier time of it, loving God and one another now and forevermore.