

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 21, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"THOSE WHOM JESUS HELPS"

John 12:1-8

As some of you know, over the past couple of months I have had two cataract surgeries. In three weeks I will finally get proper glasses. But for now I am fumbling around with a pair of reading glasses. May I say that with these glasses on, most of you are quite hazy to me. Please have patience if it takes me a moment to recognize you at the door. But I don't dare take them off or I won't see my notes up here.

Back when I was about 10 years old. I started to have trouble seeing the blackboard. Stubbornly I resisted asking the teacher to move me to the front of the class. But I told my parents about my plight and soon they had me tested and outfitted with glasses. A few years later, when I was 12 and in Grade 7, there was boy in my class, Paul, who was not nearly as stubborn as I had been. He always asked the teacher if he could sit near the front. He had glasses but they needed to be changed. One day Paul and I were playing chess together at lunch and I asked the obvious question, "Why don't you get new glasses?" He answered, "My parents can't afford them." That shocked me. I didn't grow up in a wealthy home, but we were able to get everything we required. It bothered me that Paul couldn't get the glasses he needed. I told my mother about it that evening, and she assured me that there were groups and agencies that could help Paul get new glasses. That comforted me, and as I recall, in a few months he had them. When we are younger, we have a sense of compassion for the poor and needy which may get eroded with age.

Now John 12:1-11 has to do with the poor, but not just those who lack money. It's about all of us. We are all poor, but we are also those whom Jesus helps.

Six days before the Passover, the day on which Jesus died, he came to the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner to honour him. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Then Mary took a pound of costly perfume, worth one years salary, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. This was not a poor family. Not everyone could afford such expensive perfume. The whole house was filled with its fragrance. And Judas, the one who was to betray Jesus asked, "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?" It seems like a reasonable question. God had instructed his people to look after the poor in the land. But John tells us that Judas didn't really care about the poor. Judas kept the disciples' common purse, but skimmed a bit, maybe 10% off the top for himself. Still, even 300 denarii less 10% would have done much for the poor. Thief or not, it seems Judas had a point. But Jesus said, "Let her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Everyone there, including Jesus himself, knew that in a few days Jesus was going to be killed. Ever since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, the authorities

had been plotting to get Jesus. Heavens, you couldn't have a man out there raising the dead. Everyone might start believing in Him! So besides the sweet smell of the perfume, the stench of Jesus' impending death was in the air, too. Mary's action was a sacrificial act of gratitude for restoring her brother to the family. But she was also preparing Jesus' body ahead of time for burial. Jesus accepted Mary's extravagant action and said, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (12:8)

Now Jesus was not being insensitive to the poor. In fact, he was quoting Deuteronomy 15:11, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you. Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land." Jesus was saying "This is Mary's last chance to do such a thing for me. After I'm gone you will have plenty of opportunities to care for the poor."

You always have the poor with you. How true Jesus' word is. No society has ever been able to completely eliminate poverty. Some people are poor because they are oppressed and exploited by the powerful and greedy. Others because of drought and disease or because of a country's particular economic and political system. Some are poor because they can't work or sometimes, won't. Some are poor because of their own bad choices. In fact, many poor may have good jobs, but their huge debt load puts them underwater. I read recently of young man who spent freely because he thought he would receive a sizable inheritance from his father who gave the impression of being well-to-do. The father died, and after his estate was settled and his debts were paid, the young man received the princely sum of \$3,000. There are always poor in the land, for whatever reason. Now I don't know what we do about those who And Jesus was counselling his followers to help those who do not or cannot share in the bounty God has provided.

A few years, the writer Michael Peterson appeared on a TV talk show in Toronto. He writes about his experience in "Chicken Soup for the Soul." At the end of the show he was walking back to his hotel. At Yonge and Bloor he saw a man lying on the sidewalk in four inches of snow. The sleeping man's only protection against the cold was a piece of cardboard. Peterson was shocked by the fact that the man had no socks or shoes. He thought he should stop and help but as the traffic light changed, he found himself being swept along by the rush of pedestrians to the other side. Now before we are too hard on Mr. Peterson, let's admit I that we've all been there. Sometimes the rush of life sweeps us along. But at least noticing opens up the possibility of helping. To lose the ability to see the poor or feel compassion for the needy would be the worst thing of all. And I am thankful that there are plenty of opportunities here in our church and in the community to extend help to the poor. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

But what we want to grasp is this - that we are all poor. Most of us are not poor in a material or money sense. But there is a poverty in our souls caused by sin. We think of Judas as some great sinner. But he was just a common, everyday, self-centred thief. Every one of Jesus' apostles had fallen into some kind of disobedience. Not one person with whom Jesus sat there at table had clean hands, not Mary, not Martha or Lazarus or

any of the apostles.

What about today? Theft, fraud, lying, cheating - it's as common as today's newspaper. Sidney Crosby's gloves and hockey stick turned up, but we suspected they'd been stolen because that's the way the world is. And you know, we're all guilty. Yes, we sometimes do extravagant acts of generosity like Mary, and we serve like Martha, but there is something of Judas in us, too. Each human soul is scarred by sin and greed and self-interest. Some of us, let's face it, have taken what does not belong to us. Sometimes we have passed by those whom we could have helped. We are sometimes ungrateful and stubborn and complaining. We sometimes betray others or tell lies. We all fall short of the loving, compassionate people God created us to be. In fact, the Bible says in our natural condition we are dead in our sins and trespasses - as dead as Lazarus had been in the tomb. "The poor you always have with you," because we always have ourselves, and each of us is poor in soul in some way. Our lives become polluted by the stench of sin and as the Bible tells us, "The wages of sin is death."

We are all poor, but we are those whom Jesus helps. That's the good news. We are those whom Jesus helps! Lazarus was one of those at table with Jesus. Do you know what the name Lazarus means? It means one whom God helps. Jesus sure had helped Lazarus, saying to the dead man as he lay in the tomb, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus staggered forth. The one who was dead lived! And in helping Lazarus, he had helped his sisters, too. That's why they served a great meal for him. And Jesus had helped all those at the table. Jesus was about to die for them all even for Judas! Jesus was about to die for the world. He was about to die in love for us! He was going to die so that we who are dead in our sins and trespasses can now live in Him whom God raised from the dead. Paul says that once "you were dead in your sins and trespasses, but God, who is rich in mercy out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you are saved...."

So it is for us who have accepted God's invitation to feed on Christ by faith. We have been made alive together with Christ. He has saved us from the stench of sin and death and gives us the sweet fragrance of forgiveness and new life. We are Judas, but we are also Lazarus. We are poor in spirit, but we are those whom Jesus helps! Jesus has helped us, he is helping us now, and he will help us forever. One day we shall eat with Christ and all God's people at the heavenly banquet table. And right now Christ is stirring up faith and hope and love and gratitude and compassion within us. He is strengthening us to turn from sin and to walk in God-honouring paths of integrity and truth. He is making us into people who can be trusted to do what is right and good, people who do not take what belongs to another. He is strengthening us to care for the poor. He is empowering us to be ambassadors for Christ through word and deed, so that others may believe in him.

There is a more to Michael Peterson's story. Several days later, he was back for another show. After the show all the important people left quickly and only he and the janitor were left. They struck up a conversation. The janitor said that he had been feeling sorry for himself because his car had broken down and he had to ride his bike to work in

the snow. But that feeling passed when he saw a man with no socks or shoes sleeping on the corner of Yonge and Bloor covered only by cardboard. Michael Peterson fell speechless as the janitor told how he went into a nearby store and bought the homeless man a pair of socks and shoes. At first, Michael Peterson felt guilty that he had not done this for the man. Then he was comforted because he realized that Christ had not left that homeless man alone, but worked through a compassionate soul to meet his need. Michael Peterson felt the peace of Christ's forgiveness, then felt challenged again, because he realized that along life's road, God would give him many more opportunities to serve those in need.

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." We are all poor, but we are those whom Jesus helps! And through us, Jesus now helps the poor in body and the poor in spirit. In fact, here's what's interesting. No, we don't have Jesus in the flesh, though we have him with us now by the power of the Holy Spirit. But we have him with us in another way, too. Right now the Crucified and Risen One so identifies with the poor and needy that when we do a kind act for one of them, we are doing it unto him.