

Living with the World's Intractable Problems

Mark 14:3-9

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. John D. Suk

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Things were tough in Jesus' day. Israel was occupied by a foreign enemy, Rome, just as Europe was occupied by Nazis, 75 years ago. The Romans adorned major intersections with crucifixions. Roman police were not accountable to an, "Office of the Independent Police Review Director," as they are in Ontario. Financial collapse. Poverty. Internally displaced refugees. Things were tough in Jesus' day.

So what does Jesus do? Well, he goes to a party, a party at Simon the Leper's house. A party! Jesus could have organized resistance fighters, or set up soup kitchens, or raised funds for widows of the crucified. But no, Jesus goes to a party, instead.

Once he's there, a woman walks up to Jesus, breaks open a bottle of Chanel-grade perfume, and adoringly pours it all over Jesus' head and beard. A hush falls over the crowd. What this woman has done is just short of salacious. Scandalous. I don't know what the modern day equivalent might be. But just imagine a party where an escort lady shushes the crowd, walks over to a single guest, raises his arm, and puts a Patek Philippe watch on his wrist. Extravagant and unexpected and, well, just crazy.

Party-goers immediately object. "What? The people are oppressed and starving and dying and she spends money on perfume? Give me a break! Why didn't she spend that money on the poor?"

Do you hear the righteous indignation? Do you hear the people sing, singing the songs of angry men?

And would we, should we join in the refrain? Because although our problems are not exactly the same, today we live in dangerous times too. Our world and the future of our children and neighbours are all under threat. Let me give a few examples.

As I sat down to write this sermon, the top story in the *Toronto Star* was about a pair of twelve-year-old First Nation girls who committed suicide—not long after their community asked for, and was refused, help from the Federal government to deal with the demoralized youth in their village. The bad news we face when it comes to First Nations in Canada never seems to stop. It's depressing. Still, we have time to party.

Or again, the other top story in the paper as I was writing this sermon—other than the upcoming Trump inauguration—was that for the third year in a row the world had just experienced its hottest year ever. There is increasing fear in the scientific community that world-altering, destructive climate change is here to stay.

But we face more than climate change. War in the Middle East. Terrorism. Refugees flooding into Europe. Overpopulation. Resource depletion. Ocean pollution. Massive wildlife extinctions. And an issue that has become much more than just academic for me—racism. Modern humanity is dancing on a slippery slope at the edge of an apocalyptic chasm.

Frankly, it's depressing. Overwhelming. What shall we do?

Party? Live extravagantly? Spend on Patek Philippe watches or BMWs or March vacations on sailing boats, in Grenada, like Irene and I are going to do?

Or will we pull out every stop for the sake of our children and grandchildren? Will we slam on the brakes and batten down the hatches and unwind the ropes that tie the lady to the tracks? Do we even dare not sacrifice our ease and pleasure to save the world? Because although our problems are not exactly the same as Simon the Leper's problems, we too live in very dangerous times. It's overwhelming and depressing if you think about it too long. Living in denial would be a lot easier.

But back to the story in our scripture passage. We saw that a lady, probably a lady-of-the-night cracks open a bottle of very, very expensive perfume and pours it all over Jesus. But the party-goers object! "That's crazy!" they say. "People are starving, and you spend money on perfume?"

And Jesus' says something like, "never mind. I like it. And besides, you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish."

What do we make of Jesus' words?

Well, first, in no way does Jesus suggest that we ought to ignore the poor—or any other problem the world faces. In fact, quite the opposite. Jesus does care about the poor. He will soon sacrifice his life for the poor. Day by day, Jesus is said to have healed them of their diseases. He has fed them by the lakeside. He has taught them how to live in dangerous times in his Sermon on the Mount. After Jesus' crucifixion, his followers will share everything with each other, as each has need, because they learned this from Jesus. Poverty reduction, quality of life for the least and the last—this was a big deal for Jesus. As it should be for us.

So we owe it to our children and our children's children to find solutions to the sort of problems I described earlier. We dare not err on the side of selfishness when it comes to volunteering resources to tackle these problems. Whether it means offering political support for difficult choices, or volunteering for increases in taxes, or making life-style changes, or using our influence at work, or volunteering time, or joining lobbying groups, we dare not ignore the poor or any other major contemporary, human issue. We are, after all, after the example of Jesus, here to love our neighbours, even if that means sacrificing, as in Jesus' case . . . everything.

Second, we ought to also tackle these problems—as Jesus did—because we are actually making progress on some of the most pressing issues. For example, according to the World Bank, not a place generally known for optimism, progress looks like:

a. Whereas in 1950 75% of the world's population lived in extreme poverty, by 1981 that had been reduced to only 44% percent of the world's population. And at present, only 10% of the world's population lives in extreme poverty. Though we will always have the poor with us, as a percentage of the world's population, we have many fewer now than ever before.

b. Or again, in 1820, best estimates are that only 10% of the world's population was literate. Today world literacy runs at about 80%. This goes a long way to explaining the reduction in poverty. Education allows people to attach themselves to the world economy, to understand their circumstances better, to contribute more efficiently.

c. In 1800, 43% of the world's newborns died before age five. By 1950, that number was about 20%. In today's world, only 5% of newborns die in infancy. That's amazing progress.

d. And, finally, perhaps this is least expected of all, while in the 1950s about 250 people per million were dying as a result of war. At present, less than 10 people per million, worldwide, are dying as a result of war. Even with a recent uptick in the number of deaths due to war, mostly due to the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, fewer people are dying in violent conflicts now than at any other time in the past 500 years.

The bottom line is that even though the news cycle thrives on the latest disaster—whether it be a car accident on local TV or a terrorist strike in Turkey on Network news—the underlying and largely untold story of humanity over the past few hundred years, and especially the past fifty years, is one of great human progress and achievement.

So, we ought to tackle all the world's problems because that is what Jesus did, and we are followers of Jesus. And, by the way, when we do so, we make progress.

But finally, we should not neglect the party, either. Because, as Jesus also demonstrated, we need to make room for gratitude like the nameless woman's gratitude for whatever it was that Jesus did for her. We should not neglect to party, because as Jesus illustrated, life is a gift, a wonder, a miracle, and we need to embrace that life, because (as in Jesus' own case) it is short. We should not neglect to party because humans are created for each other, for loving friends and neighbours and family, and how better to do so than together? We should not neglect to party, because in the Bible, every party Jesus attended, from the wedding in Cana to the bash at Simon's and the stories he told in his parables—in the Bible, every party connected to Jesus is a symbol of God's ultimate aim for the human race, true shalom, great joy, and plenty.

So, let's tackle the world's problems as we have time and energy and resources and wisdom. And along the way, let's party, too. Let's work up a sweat on behalf of some critical cause and then enjoy the aroma of success. There are sacrifices to make, but also joys to embrace. As with Jesus, let's not skimp on either side of that equation.