

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John E. Judson
November 22, 2009
“Waste or Worship”
Mark 14:1-11

It was the announcement of a life time. It was the announcement that every Christian ought to hear. It would change the lives of whomever was listening. I have to say that kind of language caught my attention. I was headed out to do a hospital visit in San Antonio and was listening to the Christian music station there when the DJ came on almost breathless with anticipation encouraging all of us to stay tuned. In just a few minutes, he said, one of the Christian rock world’s icons would be on to announce something that God had showed him. Curious I actually stayed tuned. Finally the moment arrived. The DJ asked the artist, what is it that you discovered that will be so life changing for our listeners? Well, the man replied, I have discovered that believers are supposed to help the poor. I waited for the punch line, but the DJ replied, wow, where did you ever come up with such an idea? The reply? Well, I was reading my Bible...have you ever wanted to leap through a radio and throttle someone for saying the obvious as if it is new discovery?

We might suppose that for some of the listeners of that show this announcement was indeed life changing. For those of us present here this morning this is nothing new. This concept that we as Jesus followers are charged with feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and offering shelter to the homeless is part of our core values. We are to serve those in need. We get it...and Jesus disciples got it as well. While we may want to assume that Jesus had to teach his followers about serving the poor, he didn’t. Judaism, and especially Second Temple Judaism had a proud and long tradition of alms giving to the poor. There was in fact in Jerusalem a sort of religious social safety net which served to care for the widows and orphans. What Jesus did was to take this religious obligation to serve the poor and raise it to a response to God’s love rather than a way to earn spiritual brownie points. None-the-less this is something the disciples understood; we are to care for the poor; which is what makes this morning’s passage so hard to understand.

This story, and the events upon which it is based, have been a source of confusion and frustration for Jesus followers from the very beginning. The scene is set with Jesus and his disciples at the house of on Simon the Leper. They are all reclining at dinner, there being no chairs, when an unnamed woman arrives. She enters the room carrying an alabaster jar. She walks over to Jesus, breaks the jar open and pours out perfume all over Jesus’ head. The fragrance instantly fills the room and everyone knows what kind of perfume this is. It is ointment of nard. Now just to clue you in, nard was very rare and very, very expensive. It was imported from India. Usually one would be anointed with only a few drops, but this woman pours out the whole thing. The disciples are stunned. They realize that had the perfume been sold they could have, literally, fed thousands of the poor for an extended period of time. They

are incensed at the waste that has just occurred, and they say so. Most of us would probably have gone along with them. What happens next then is what causes us to pause. Jesus not only thanks the woman, declaring what she has done to be a good work, but then says, the poor we will always have with us. What are we to do with this from the lips of the one who said when you do these good things to least of these, you do them unto me?

I am not sure what you will do with them but I can tell you what the church has done with them over the past two thousand years; we have used them to argue over what is waste and what is worship. How so? Consider the debate that virtually every church has had since the time of the Apostle Paul. On the one hand you have those who see worship as the equivalent of pouring out the ointment on Jesus through acts such as creating buildings, statues and icons as gifts to God. Created as acts of devotion they are places and spaces and items which allow us to feel the grandeur of God and thus align our hearts in worship to the one who has given us life. If you have ever been in some of the great cathedrals you can sense the very reverence that those spaces demand. All else for them is waste. After all the poor are always going to be around. On the other side of the coin are those who see worship as an act of serving the poor. That is true worship. Serving the needy is the act that not only emulates Jesus' in his life but it allows the love of Christ to be seen out in the world. Everything else including buildings, and organs and all the sundry church stuff is waste.

So what then are we to do with this? How are we to decide whether something is worship or waste? I think what we need to do is to return to our story. Once again to set the scene let's be clear that we have no idea what was running through the woman's head when she anointed Jesus. Chances are it was simply and act of love; a willingness like the widow with her gift, to give everything to God. What we do know however is how Jesus explained it. What he says is that she has anointed his body for burial. One of the great Jewish customs and obligations, and that word is important, is to anoint a body before it is buried. This is in fact perhaps the greatest obligation; even greater than feeding the poor. Why, well simply because you only have one chance to anoint the body and, wait for it, the poor are always with you. Meaning once the body is buried the obligation to serve the poor is still there. In other words what Jesus is doing is saying that acts of worship come in different shapes and sizes, are offered in different ways, and fulfill different obligations. And if you want to see Jesus' take on supporting day to day religious obligations, note his affirmation of the widow who gave everything to the Temple, even if the Temple, as Amy told us last week, was doomed.

What this tells us then is that worship comes in all shapes and sizes, all forms and fashions. Worship can indeed be buildings where the faithful come and offer their hearts and minds to God in order to be more carefully formed into Jesus followers. Worship can be service to the poor and needy. It can be the giving of food baskets and warm clothes and all the things that this church does on a regular basis. Worship can be, and I know this is still tough for some here, the purchase of a new organ, remembering that this instrument is here not for secular concerts but to help us give glory to God. In terms of what we are here to do this morning, make pledges to the life and work of this community of faith, what we need to understand is that every

dime you give is going to enhance and expand the worship of God in Christ. The money you pledge will help to keep this building running, not only for us on Sunday mornings, but for Alcoholics Anonymous, and Emotions Anonymous, Alanon, for the FAR conservatory that serves special needs children. Your gifts will support the staff who insure not only that this building is ready to use, but lead our education programs, teach adults, lead in worship, provide wonderful music and proclaim the word insuring that this and future generations will know the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. Your gifts will go beyond the walls of this building to serve the hungry in Detroit and the poor around the world. In your giving to this church community there is no waste. Every dime is targeted toward some aspect of insuring that worship in all of its varied components is carried out in this place.

The challenge then is to consider what God is calling you to give to insure that worship, in all of its forms, lives here. If you have not pledged before I challenge you to do so, not only to support the work of this worshipping community, but as an act of personal worship. I believe that this community and all that it does to worship God in Christ is worthy of your support. The challenge is yours.