

# *Virtue Signal*

## *John 12.1-8*

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Thousands of us preachers receive encouragement from Jason Micheli's podcast *Crackers and Grape Juice*. Here's my commentary on one of Jason's Christ the King sermons—two preachers thinking together about the challenges of doing politics in the pulpit with Jesus.

For God's sake, don't lie.

Admit it. You think Judas is right.

You know that you're not supposed to identify with Judas the traitor, the villain. Judas is the *Judas*, the bastard who turns around right after today's text to rat out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, which according to the prophet Zechariah was about a day's wage. A day's wage.

But be honest. If you saw a line item in our church operating budget for nard, you'd be po'd too. Nard was a perfume from the Himalayas. 300 denarii is what Judas guesses it would go for on the open market. 300 denarii was the rough equivalent to \$45,000.00.

You think Judas is right on the money about the money. Considering the cost of nard, it would be better to rub Jesus down with some \$5.99 Old Spice and give the remaining \$44,990.00 for do-gooding. And doing good is what it's about, right?

*Way to go, Jason. Lure them into the sermon by naming their secret sympathy with Judas. Treat 'em rough.*

After all, Matthew's account of this anointing occurs right after Jesus lays down every liberal Methodist's favorite parable—clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, and visiting the prisoner. So who blames Judas for wanting to be reckoned a sheep rather than a goat?

*Matthew 25, favorite text (they think) of all Methodist do-gooders. Nice juxtaposition between Matthew and John. Move them from a text they think they know to consideration of a text they probably don't know, allowing scripture to interpret scripture.*

If we're honest, it's hard for us to see what Judas got wrong. Christians ought to be on the side of the poor. The world sees our inability to live up to Christ's teachings about the poor and judges us accordingly. Isn't Judas's the better strategy for the Church to survive in a pagan nation like America? After all, Americans may not believe that Jesus is Lord, but they at least believe we ought to help the poor. Serving the poor is a way for us as Christians to win friends and influence people.

*Interesting link with the American church's insecurity about our status in the culture. Why does the mainline church "help the poor"? Because it's the last socially acceptable thing the church has left to do. It took a while, but now I get the title of your sermon.*

In first century Israel, *poor* was a political category. The poor weren't lazy or left behind. The poor were the oppressed. Read your Old Testament. The poor were

poor because they were oppressed. If you don't understand the relationship between poverty and oppression, you won't understand Palm Sunday when the "Messiah" turns out to be Jesus.

Judas isn't simply suggesting that this down payment's worth of perfume should've been shared with the poor; he's arguing that it'd be better spent on the cause. The money should have been used to free the poor, liberate the oppressed. Judas's point is not just about charity. It's about justice. After all, he's named for Israel's most famous armed revolutionary.

"Why was this nard not sold for almost fifty grand and the money given to the Democratic National Committee?"

"Why was this perfume not sold and the money donated to Make Israel Great Again?" "What a waste! Don't you people know your Micah 6.8?! The change we could work with that much cash!"

*Politics! You make an adept connection—concisely, without a lot of academic throat-clearing—between our notions of "poor" and "politics," "charity" and "justice." You're taking a risk in your association of Judas and his particular brand of betrayal with the DNC and MIGA. No risk = boring sermon. Now your sermon is beginning to move toward Christ the King with your reference to Palm Sunday. I bet the congregation, who knows you well, expects that you are on your way to a Micheli move: "Jesus Christ is Lord; Caesar is not."*

Which puts Judas (and thus, puts us) in the same camp as Caiphias.

In the text just before today's, John tells us that a crowd of Jews, having witnessed Jesus speak Lazarus forth from the dead, began "believing into Jesus."

Some of these bystanders tattled on Jesus to the Pharisees, and the Pharisees went to the chief priests, and the chief priests went and tattled to the Chief Priest, Caiphias. Caiphias, who in a few short chapters will be outing himself with the words "We have no King but Caesar." "If we let him go on like this," Caiphias worries, "everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy our nation." When the chief religious leaders of God's people hear about Jesus' power over the Power of Death, their worry is not religious. It's political.

Sit with that for a second.

Like we do, Caiphias had been towing the God and Country line, but as soon as the Living God shows up, our true colors come out. When Caiphias hears Christ can raise the dead, two things worry him: currency and country. Jesus is hiding out in Bethany because just after Jesus produces Lazarus alive from the tomb, Caiphias plots to kill Jesus. Why? Because Caiphias worries that Christ's power over the Power of Death will upset the political arrangement of the powers-that-be.

*This section of the sermon requires fancy hermeneutical footwork. You've introduced another figure, Caiphias, reminding us of his infamous "We have no king but Caesar." It's doubtful that your listeners know much about Caiphias. You are also adding to your sermon's complexity with your assertion of a linkage between the "power of Death" and politics. The political significance of resurrection is a powerful point to make on Christ the King, but it's a dense theological thought. I very much like your reminder of Lazarus and the way that his resuscitation leads Jesus' critics to murderous thoughts based on their deadly politics. Still, I wonder if you risk losing them here. You seem aware of these possible pitfalls with your words "Sit with that for a second." Nice signal: folks, we are about to take a dive into the deep end of the pool.*

Don't forget:

This is the same Caiphas who on Good Friday will condemn Jesus to a cross while pledging to Pontius Pilate what no Jew should ever say: "We have no King but Caesar." Messiah, King, and Caesar all name the same word. Caiphas is saying, "We have no Messiah but the King you call Caesar."

"Forty-five grand! We could've donated that money to MoveOn.org—think of the justice work we could do," Judas says.

"Power over Death? Death makes our economy of scarcity possible and gives us authority over the people. Resurrection will ruin the nation," says Caiphas. You see—Judas and Caiphas' failure is not faithlessness. Their failure is a failure of political imagination.

*Use a phrase like "a failure of the political imagination," and watch their eyes glaze over. You've got your work cut out for you keeping them on board. Yet I see that's exactly what you intend to do in the rest of the sermon. By setting an (at first glance) offensive text next to the text you're exploring, then by giving us some specific instances of the politics of resurrection at work, you are doing all you can to keep your listeners with you on this journey.*

In order to see their failure as a failure of political imagination, however, we must first admit our embarrassment about what Jesus says to Judas: "You'll always have the poor with you; you don't always have me." Try that verse out on a woke, Bernie supporter. What Jesus says to Judas seems to legitimate the non-Christian critique of apathetic, pie-in-the-sky Christianity. But please note: The one who said "You'll always have the poor with you; you don't always have me" is himself poor. Jesus is poor. Jesus is oppressed. And very soon, Jesus will be the naked, parched, the stranger shunned, the prisoner abandoned by all but his mother and a single disciple. Surrounded by goats, they'll be the only sheep at his side for the Last Judgement that is his Cross.

This is why Caiphas plots to kill him. We think Judas is right, but we miss how right Caiphas really is. Jesus is a threat to our politics, the end of the world as we know it.

Mary upends our categories of helping the poor and the oppressed by her extravagance toward a poor person (who also happens to be the incarnate God). Jesus praises her for doing a good and joyful thing that shall always be remembered.

Judas has got his mind stuck in the grave—he still thinks that change-making comes in terms of charity and campaign contributions, but Mary's response to Jesus' power over the Power of Death is to shower two-thirds of our entire mission budget on a solitary poor man living on borrowed time. Judas lacks Mary's imagination.

*I love watching your interpretative imagination at work. "Poor" is not a sociological, economic category; poor is what God did to be among us as the Christ. We shall worship and serve God as the kenotic, impoverished Jesus or not at all.*

Jesus does not imply that we should be resigned to the way of the world. On the contrary, we will always have the poor with us because the Church, the Body of Christ, is put in the world so that the world may know, by the sacrament of the resurrection, how the poor and the prisoner, the naked and the shunned, are to be celebrated. The Church is the People of God in the world who know that we can afford to love the poor with lavishness because Christ is a gift that can never be used up. So of course we'll always have the poor with us because the Church is the Body of him who is

poor. We will always have the poor with us because the Body of Christ is for them.

“Leave her alone,” the poor man said to Judas. “She bought it [all \$45K!] for me.” Jesus praises Mary because Mary understands that Jesus makes a different politics possible. She-and-her-nard constitutes the different politics which God has made possible in the world in Jesus.

*As Bonhoeffer said, “The church is the way the risen Christ has chosen to take up room in the world.” Thanks for the reminder of the lavishness of God in action in the Body of Christ.*

Karl Barth wrote: “Whenever Christians use a construction like Christianity and politics, they open the door to every devil.” Barth pointed out that when the devil tempts Christ in the wilderness by offering him the governments of this world, the implication is that the governments of this world are the devil’s to give. Barth was one of the few German Christians to stand up against Hitler’s Nazi regime. As soon as the church begins to ponder how its Christianity can be helpful to politics, Barth argued, such a church might have great sincerity and zeal, and good works of charity, but it will be a church that’s failed to understand that the church is the peculiar way God has chosen to love and redeem the world.

*Thanks for invoking Barth, though again, I’m unsure that your listeners will appreciate the revolutionary impact of Barth’s warning against conjunctions. You are making me evaluate my own preaching. Am I demanding too little work from my listeners? How I love the way you take your listeners seriously. You engage deadly serious matters in a playful, beguiling way, and you don’t waste our time with cliché and cant. Kudos for preaching a deeply “political” sermon without saying “Since God is either dead or retired, let us go forth to defeat racism, sexism, ageism, classism. It’s up to us to do right or right won’t be done.”*

God has chosen not the House or the Senate. Neither POTUS or SCOTUS, not bills, billboards, or hashtags. But his People. The Church. The Body of Christ, sent by the Spirit, is God’s virtue signal; that is to say, the Church doesn’t have a politics; the Church is a politics. What do I mean by “the church is a politics”?

*Now the sermon touches down upon the Body of Christ otherwise known as Anandale UMC. Nice.*

Yesterday afternoon we celebrated a Service of Death and Resurrection for a man in the community, Gordon. Gordon was a Vietnam vet. The cancer that killed him likely came from Agent Orange that killed others. A couple of days before he died, he called me to his bedside. In addition to wanting to profess that Jesus is Lord and give to Christ what remained of his life, Gordon also wanted to confess his sins. “I want to confess,” he told me, staring at the ceiling, “what I had to do in the war—it was necessary, but it was still sin.”

Think about it—he was dying. Time was a precious, valuable commodity to him. Time was a gift, and Gordon wanted to give it, to lavish it—some would say waste it—by giving his confession to Christ.

In a culture that ships our soldiers off to do what is necessary and then, when they return home, we insist that they not tell us about what we’ve asked them to do, Gordon’s confession— what the Church calls the care of souls—that’s a politics.

*“Say something political on Christ the King, church.” Church says, “Church.” You and I will never be able to get Stanley Hauerwas out of our sermons, thank God.*

It’s how God has chosen to care for the world.

During the funeral service, Gordon's son spoke candidly about his often difficult, sometimes estranged relationship with his father. In a culture of sentimentality and pretense, the sort of truth-telling that this sanctuary makes possible—that's a politics.

Later this afternoon, a group from church will go up to Sleepy Hollow Nursing Home to worship with elderly residents who may not be able to hear it or comprehend it. In a culture like ours that is determined to get out of life alive—a culture that worships at the altar of youth and achievement—the old are cloistered away and cast-off. It's a simple thing some of you will do at Sleepy Hollow. But make no mistake, it's a politics.

*Bring it home. All politics is local. Well done.*

The way God has chosen to heal the world is the Church—that's what we forget whenever we argue about the Church and Politics. The politics of Christians ought to be unintelligible if God has not raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

We're the nard that God has purchased at great cost to lavish Christ upon the dying world.

#### Note

Preached on Christ the King Sunday, 2020, at Annandale United Methodist Church, Annandale, Virginia.