

Fifth Sunday in Lent

WHAT GREED WILL GET YOU

John 12:1-8

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Analysis by Bill White

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 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. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

DIAGNOSIS: GOTTEN BY GREED

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Greed*

Judas is irritated. He is perturbed because Mary has anointed Jesus' feet with a pint of very expensive aromatic oil. He asks, "Don't y'all know what that's worth? We could have sold that perfume for an entire year's wages! Why didn't we sell it and give the money to the poor?"

But there are mixed motives behind Judas' questions. John tells us Judas is a thief. What has really upset Judas is not that an opportunity has been missed to minister to the poor but that an opportunity has been missed to greatly increase the amount of money in the disciples' treasury—over which Judas has charge. What has been missed from Judas' perspective is an opportunity for significant embezzlement! Hence, John wants us to know that while Judas' words may echo what Jesus is teaching, his pious words are in reality Judas' effort to conceal his greed.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Faith in Greed*

One may observe greedy behavior in another person. But greedy behavior comes from within the greedy person. Judas' greedy words and deeds reveal the deeper problem of greed itself. This intense and selfish desire for money and the things that it is believed money can buy—power, prestige, pleasure, influence, security, and the things that will give meaning, purpose, and joy in life—is in reality idolatry, i.e. greed is faith in a false god.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The God of Greed Kills*

Blinded by greed, Judas is unable to see that Jesus approves of what Mary has done. Worse still, Judas is unable to see that his greed is separating him from Jesus and from the gospel of Jesus' impending death on the cross. Soon Judas' greed will indeed drive him to betray Jesus unto death. This kind of faith grounded in money will prove to be faith in a powerless, empty god unable to deliver what was perceived to have been promised. Faith in the god of greed will drive Judas to his own death.

PROGNOSIS: GOTTEN BY GOD

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Greed for Us in Christ Saves*

This betrayal of Jesus is actually God's plan for the salvation

of the world (John 3:16-17). If greed may be defined as “intense, selfish desire,” then at the cross of Good Friday we see God’s greed for us in Christ Jesus. The burial for which Mary has anointed Jesus is the burial to come, following his sacrificial death on the cross. But neither the power of the god of greed nor the power of death can hold Jesus. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...” the stone will be found to have been rolled away and Jesus will have been raised from the dead (John 20:1, 11-18). By his death on the cross and glorious resurrection the power of the false gods of this life and the power of death are overcome for all time. God in Christ is “greedy” to save us from sin, Satan, and death.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faith in Christ*
As glorious as the resurrection is, Jesus does more than rise from the dead. The resurrected Lord now seeks out his followers, his frightened, denying, doubting, weak-faithed, and even greedy disciples. He comes to them with the gift of peace, a peace only he can give. And he breathes on them the Holy Spirit who works true faith in Christ within them that replaces the former faith in the god of greed (John 20:19-23).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Generosity*
Better still, this same Holy Spirit changes greedy lives to compassionate, generous ones. And this is not just living lives being “relatively generous” in general. Grounded in faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit empowers believers to overcome greedy desires and behaviors, and replace them with genuine compassion and care for the poor whom Christ calls them to serve.