

## **Restoring Fortunes, Balancing Needs**

Sermon on Psalm 126 & John 12:1-8

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Trinity United, Ottawa

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### ***“Restore our fortunes, O Lord”***

In Lenten wilderness times, we join an ancient psalmist in looking back into history and seeing how God restored the peoples’ fortunes, in times past. In that memory, we give thanks and feel a joy that inspires us now, to look to the future with hope and faith: God will once again restore our fortunes! Thirsty Lenten wilderness times will not go on forever.

Then and now, God promises resurrection and new life, like Springtime in the Negev desert, when the dried up riverbeds suddenly overflowed with rushing mountain streams.

Today, we read this psalm in spiritual solidarity with people in Sierre Leone who live in ‘desert times,’ and with those children of our Canadian Arctic, who are thirsty for education and for their sustaining Inuit culture. Help us help to you restore their fortunes, O Lord!

Responsive Reading of Psalm 126 in Voiced United at #850

Dramatic Presentation of John 12:1-8. Mary Perfumes Jesus’ Feet

### ***“Why was this perfume not sold...and the money given to the poor?”***

This story reminds me of the beginnings of the Mummers’ Troupe of Newfoundland in the ‘60s, one of the earliest Canadian ‘experimental’ theatre companies. This dedicated group of professional artists travelled to rural and outport communities, creating shows that reflected local concerns and empowered the people to organize and change their lives. Like Jesus’ community, the Mummers’ Troupe lived communally. All funds were kept in a common purse that was used to cover living expenses, and individuals took out money for what they needed. That worked for a while. Until an actor appeared one day, wearing a brand new pair of red shoes.

When her shoes attracted attention and suspicion - like Mary's costly perfume - the actor said that she was depressed, and the new shoes were what she really needed to cheer her up and keep her working.

You can imagine the debate that ensued, about what was a need and what was a want! They didn't come up with any workable guidelines, so alas, they gave up their communal economic aspect of their theatre experiment.

O, the difficult questions of how to recognize and balance needs, in what we perceive to be an economy of scarcity! When we fear that there will never be enough, we will always be torn between generosity and security. Perhaps today's appeal to participate in our Trinity Jubilee 'Spring of Hope' campaign precipitates that kind of struggle in you? Let's not feel guilty. But let's look at it. And see if our gospel story helps us to each find our own wisdom for today?

So, who did you identify with, in this story of Mary pouring costly nard on Jesus feet,? Not a lot of us are going to admit: Judas! Not after hearing Luke's particular version of this event, common to all the gospels. Luke makes it clear that Judas is the bad guy. But what were Lazarus and the other Jesus followers there thinking? Was Mary wasting 'their' money? Was she insensitive to the needs of the poor? Luke has Jesus pronounce on this ethical dilemma, but his pronouncement only serves to confuse us. Because it kind of sounds like Jesus is being 'selfish', eh? Surely not! Or is Jesus taking care of himself? Gracefully receiving what is given to him in his time of need? Or is this story really about Mary sharing love extravagantly, the cost be damned.

Don't you struggle sometimes with how to spend and share your resources? And how to spend and share your love and attention, too? There is really no easy answer here! There is only your heart's delicate balance, in response to the seemingly competing needs of the moment.

When the implications of Jesus' radical Kingdom economy permeate our consciousness through biblical stories like this one, we who live in Ottawa - surely the 'flow of the Negev' compared to the economic deserts of Africa or even the Inuit of our own North - we are challenged with dilemmas about wealth distribution. Challenged to move beyond our fearful scarcity thinking and consider whose fortunes must be restored. We are challenged, here at church, to share with extravagant compassion, like Mary did. I think that's what Jesus applauded - the extravagant, vulnerable, risky compassion that her nard expressed, not its value in denarii. But I think it's also important to notice that Jesus sat back and let Mary pour love on his feet. He was ready to receive, to be cared for, to get his own real needs met. So we can too.

At the turn of the millennium, ten years ago, the United Church initiated an international campaign of debt forgiveness, inspired by the biblical prescription of the Jubilee. Jubilee, every fifty years, required the Hebrew people to return land that had been lost in hard times, to its original owners. And all debts had to be forgiven, offering the economically dispossessed a chance to return to productivity. Our Jubilee vision moved Canada forward on international debt forgiveness to impoverished countries like Sierra Leone. And it inspired Trinity to create our own radical response to poverty and inequality, the independent Trinity Jubilee Foundation. TJF is dedicated to redistributing our excess wealth to communities who are truly in great need. Dedicated to restoring the fortunes of people who live in poverty. And we have been doing that now, for a decade. Pouring love on the feet of children. In Africa. And now here in the North.

Discerning what is selfish and what is extravagant, what is responsible and what is compassionate - finding the balance of needs is not easy. Even within our church economy we struggle to balance our own operating budget, while giving generously to Mission and Service, our local Outreach projects and the TJF. If it were only so simple as Judas sees it - the poor or perfume! A communal purse or red shoes! But from today's Bible story, we can perhaps each consider how to do our own

balancing act with everybody's needs, including our self as Jesus did. We can hold the Creator's infinite generosity in our minds, knowing and trusting that, just as we are not alone, there will be enough. God restores fortunes, as surely as Spring comes in the desert. May we be restored, and in thanksgiving, help God to restore the fortunes of others.

Hymn: For the Healing of the Nations Voices United #678