

Welcoming the Poor

“For you will always have the poor with you. . . ” (Mark 14:7)

This saying of Jesus, extracted from the larger context of the story of his anointing by the woman at Bethany, is commonly read as a statement of *inevitability*: Because the poor are a permanent part of the human landscape, we are at least to some extent resigned to poverty as a fact of life. As is often the case, reading the whole story requires a different emphasis. Jesus says the lavish use of costly ointment (which might have been sold to benefit the poor) to prepare him for burial is an act of *“good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.”* Read this fuller context, Jesus’ emphasis is clearly on rightly appreciating the woman’s gift and not the inevitability of poverty.

In fact, what Jesus suggests here and demands elsewhere is that our response to poverty should not take the form of *fatalistic resignation* but *gracious hospitality*. That the body of Christ should serve as a place of welcome and opportunity for the poor is illustrated by the story of St. Lawrence the Deacon. The story goes that Lawrence and nine companions of the early Roman church were convicted of treason by imperial authorities. Because Lawrence served as the treasurer of the church of Rome, he was spared immediate execution. Believing the church was in the possession of great wealth, the authorities commanded Lawrence to retrieve the treasures of the church. After three days, Lawrence returned and the authorities demanded, “Where is the treasure?” Leading them through a hall to the entrance to an expansive courtyard, he threw open the doors, where outside there was assembled a great crowd of poor, blind, and crippled humanity. Lawrence proclaimed to the authorities, *“Behold, the treasure of the church.”*

With this short sentence, Lawrence named the social location of the people of God. *The church is the place where the poor should find sanctuary and be treasured.* In word and deed, Jesus engaged this mission throughout his earthly ministry and expects his followers to do likewise. The New Testament leaves no doubt that following Jesus means reaching out and welcoming the world’s poor and disenfranchised. As I John puts it, *“How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action”* (I John 3:17-18).

The end of Lawrence’s story is a sobering reminder of the cost of discipleship; he was tortured, burned, and executed by the authorities. The cost to Texas Baptists is not nearly so high. We can minister to people in our communities, advocate for the poor in public policy making, and contribute to the Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger, which supports dozens of ministries around the world. May Texas Baptists be found faithful in welcoming the poor, who are always with us.