Most of us, I’m sure, are familiar with the term “proof-texting”… that dishonest art of plucking a word or phrase – out of context – from the Bible and using it to exclude some people, put down others, tout one’s own righteousness, and, generally, use the word of God to justify one’s own prejudices.

Sometimes some so-called Christians – the sort who give Christ a bad name – don’t even need a word to justify their prejudices. There’s no room in their churches for gays or lesbians…or me. Women? Obey your husbands and shut your mouth. And don’t even think about the ministry. Preaching the Gospel? That’s for men.

Trouble is, Jesus never uttered a single word about homosexuality and certainly said nothing that denigrated women or in any way excluded them from ministry.

So what did he talk about? Think about it. Were you to take a red letter Bible and do a ‘wordle” of everything in red – you know, the words that Jesus actually spoke – you’d come up with something like this – money, rich, poor, wealth, poverty, charity, justice.

Jesus spent an awful lot of time talking about money…about how too much causes spiritual difficulties for the rich, about how too little causes physical problems for the poor, and about the good society in which there is an equitable distribution of the resources of the community.

And, make no mistake about it, Jesus was very clear about where he stood on all of this. His was not the Prosperity Gospel that comes out of Tulsa and fills our TV screens – a Gospel in which wealth is an outward sign of righteousness and God’s favor. No his was and is the Gospel in which the poor are blessed and the marginalized are welcomed.

And it is for reason that our reading this morning from John is so problematic. The church’s well-filled and self-satisfied proof-texters latch onto that last sentence, pluck out that phrase “the poor you always have with you,” and conclude that there’s nothing we can do – nothing we need do – to alleviate poverty. And the rest of us are left to wrestle with a seeming contradiction to the overwhelming thrust of Jesus’ teaching.

But, is it? A contradiction? Let’s put these seven little words back into the story about the crowd at the house of Simon the leper and consider the events there in the context of the Passion of Christ that was about to play itself out over the next few days. Consider also how
pivotal these events were in what was about to happen. Witness the fact that they are retold – nearly word for word - in three of the four synoptic Gospels.

Jesus, as we hear in John, had just raised Lazarus from the dead – his penultimate miracle, presaging his own Resurrection. This was no small stuff. This was no water into wine trick; no walking on water that some still try to attribute to hallucination; no healing the blind and lame, as other healers of the time had also reportedly done; not even curing the incurable, the lepers. No this was the raising of a dead human being. And it was not some feat of CPR or a near-death experience on some operating table. No, Lazarus had been dead for four days. As Mary, his sister, warned, he stank.

No wonder “many of the Jews…who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.” They believed, at last, that this was the Messiah. The crowds grew and they grew louder and the chief priests and Pharisees became alarmed. Mind you, Bethany is just a stone’s throw east of Jerusalem and, I expect they could hear the noise echoing across the Kidron Valley. “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and the nation”…to which Caiaphas replied “better…to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” “So,” John tells us, “from that day on they planned to put him to death.” All they needed was someone to tell them where Jesus was, so they could arrest him. The die had been cast.

Enter Judas Iscariot, who, by John’s telling, was already a conniving thief. In Mark’s version, however, Judas was but one of several in the crowd who were scandalized by what they claimed was a wasting of the precious nard. Might he also have been alarmed like the Pharisees, personally weak, and fearful? “This is going too far! The Messiah! God! He’s going to get us all killed!” For whatever his rationale, Judas high-tailed it to the Pharisees to volunteer his services in betraying Jesus. They had their man. The clock was ticking.

This, then, was the context of Mary’s extravagance, Jesus’ gratitude, and those words about the poor that have so often been twisted.

Consider Mary’s actions. She was well-known to Jesus and, like Martha and their brother Lazarus, much loved by him. It was, after all, the tears of Mary that moved Jesus to perform this miracle that he must have known would be his death knell. And, close as she was to Jesus, Mary probably was, indeed, saving the expensive perfume for Jesus’ burial. And, moved deeply by getting her brother back, why wouldn’t she have thrown herself at Jesus’ feet and poured the perfume on him in extravagant gratitude? Why is this not surprising? Would there be any limit to your gratitude, if, in response to a tearful prayer of yours, Jesus were to return a dead brother, mother, or child to you.

And would not Jesus – would not God – be moved to tears by love so reciprocated. Would not Jesus – our very human brother – chastise Mary’s critics? “Leave her alone!” he says. And, in Mark, he adds “why do you bother her? She has done a good service for me.”
And the poor? Listen once again to Mark, to his more nuanced version of that much-misused passage – “Let her alone, Jesus says, “For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish.”

Far from telling us to ignore the poor, he was urging us once again to “show kindness” to the poor…to the poor who, in the phrasing of Deuteronomy, “would always be in the land”…and reminding us of the never-ending nature of the task. All he was asking for, in this instance, was for us to pause for a moment to honor the extravagant love of a grateful woman and, I would add, to imitate it by loving God with all your heart and mind and soul. And, in like fashion, whenever we wish – whenever we can – to show kindness to the poor.

Jesus was good Jew and he knew Scripture inside out. He was always quoting it, calling his fellow Jews not just to read the words, but to live their meaning. He knew well what he was doing here, invoking the words and meaning of Deuteronomy.

And the words and meaning of Deuteronomy are clear in this regard. The God of Deuteronomy did not beat around the bush. He issued commands. “There should be no poor among you…. If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs…. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.” Yes, there will always be poor people - not always them, but sometimes us - and we must always share – and receive – openhandedly…not because those who have can look down on those who have not and offer a portion of their plenty, but because it is right and just to share. It is not a matter of noblesse oblige or feel good charity. It’s a matter of justice. It’s the way it’s spozed to be. Haven’t we been told “There should be no poor among you…?”

As Dom Helder Camara, that great Brazilian bishop and liberation theologian, once asked “When shall we have the courage to outgrow the charity mentality and see that at the bottom of all relations between rich and poor there is a problem of justice?”

When indeed?! Looking around our own very rich country where “greed is good,” where things are too often valued more than people, where so many are “hardhearted and tightfisted,” one has to wonder, in sadness and outrage, “When indeed?!”

Every day the Dow Jones hits a new high…while 46 million of our brothers and sisters live in poverty. That’s families of four scraping by on less than $23,000 a year, while Wall Street executives annually rake in individual salaries of more than $23 million. One percent of our people own 33 percent of our wealth, while 50 million of us go to bed hungry every night. And Congress seeks to reduce access to food stamps and WIC and Head Start to preserve the lowest tax rates ever for that one percent. Yes, we will always have the poor. They – perhaps we – are in every town of our land. And we’re left to ask, in sadness and outrage, “What are we to do?”
Might we also ask that question we’ve been asking every Sunday this Lent and will again this morning: “What would Jesus do **now**?”

Might he, as Lutheran pastor Ken Wheeler has suggested, call “the collective Christian community to act with faith and boldness to turn the nightmare of poverty into a table where there is enough for everyone?”

Might he, like Dr. Christopher Hughes of Doctors for America, have difficulty accepting the argument that “fighting poverty, including improving access to health care, better education and so on, must only be done on an individual, charitable basis?” Might he agree with Dr. Hughes that “that advocating for social justice and government intervention in particular, is appropriate?”

What would Jesus do now? What will you?

Yes, we will always have the poor with us. But, God tell us, “There should be no poor among you”…and God commands us “do not be hardhearted or tightfisted,” but be “openhanded”…until the poor are, at last, no more. **That** is the never-ending task of those would follow Jesus.

**AMDG**