



Inside This Issue:

Page 2

*Mary's Perfume and
No More Poverty*

Page 4

Book of the Month
for April

Weekly Zoom
HeartGroup

Page 5

RHM's *Social Jesus*
Blog on Patheos

Page 6

Jesus for Everyone
Podcast

RHM's Free Resources

Page 7

Budget Thermometer

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Herb Montgomery

"I want to offer an alternative interpretation. Poverty is a human-made reality, and therefore poverty can be eradicated through our choices in how we structure our societies...I don't believe Jesus' words in John about poor people should be interpreted as establishing as an existential reality that poverty is an eternal, unchangeable given for our world."



Mary's Perfume and No More Poverty

by Herb Montgomery

Our reading this week is from the gospel of John:

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." (John 12:1-8)

John creatively resets this story from previous versions of the Jesus story by including the characters Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. There are both significant

differences and consistent story elements. What is common in each version is a meal, a woman interrupting the meal, a container of perfume, objections from some of those present at the meal, and Jesus' defense of the woman's actions. Oral storytelling traditions commonly alter story details for the storyteller's purposes or the needs of their audience. John's storytelling does that too.

In John's version of this story, we are in Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' home, not the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke) or Simon the Leper (Mark and Matthew). The woman who interacts with Jesus is Mary of Bethany (Martha and Lazarus' sister), not the woman of ill repute as in Luke, nor an unnamed woman as in Mark and Matthew, and most definitely not Mary Magdalene (contrary to the 6th Century Pope Gregory, Mary of Magdalene is a completely different character in John's gospel). Mary also anoints Jesus' feet (not his head as in Mark and Matthew). Foot-washing was a customary hospitality practiced at dinners in a culture where people ate together seated in a reclining position on the floor, not at a table that hid guests' feet.

In this story, Mary's act is one of *gratitude*, specifically for the events of the previous chapter. In that chapter, Lazarus, Mary's brother, had gotten sick and died, and Jesus brought him back from the dead to live again. This is a repeated theme in the gospels: life and life-giving overturning, undoing, and reversing death and death-dealing. It is one of the strongest, most life-giving interpretations of the Jesus story. The

story is not primarily that someone died, but that that the state's murder of someone who was calling for social change was overturned, undone, and reversed. The life-giving teachings of this Jewish prophet of the poor from Galilee lived on in the life of his followers. In Acts 13:32-33, the early believers say: "We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by *raising up Jesus*" (italics added).

The good news in this interpretive paradigm is not that Jesus died, but that Jesus overcame death, death-dealing and the state. His story is a story of life overcoming death, or love overcoming hate, fear, injustice, and bigotry.

In John 11, Jesus conquered, reversed, and undid Lazarus' death. Jesus had said to Lazarus' and Mary's sister, Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life" (see John 11:25).

Again, in John, Mary is anointing Jesus in an act of gratitude for Jesus' reversal of sickness and death and his channeling that reversal as "the resurrection and the life." We must not miss that in John's story, Jesus states that Mary had been *saving* this perfume for Jesus' burial. So the fact that Mary instead uses it now hints that she has learned his lesson—life and love will overcome in the end.

Those hearing this story are being prepared for how John's version of the Jesus story will turn out: Perfume will not be needed to anoint a dead body

continued on page 3

lying lifeless in a tomb. No, that tomb will be found empty. Mary has embraced Jesus as the resurrection and life, and has chosen, not to save her perfume for a dead body but to use it now in gratitude. Love will win in the end. She won't need this perfume later, and she is banking on it.

So many social sicknesses are in need of reversal in our society, today: the sickness of White supremacy, the sickness of patriarchy and misogyny, the sickness of classism and greed, the sicknesses of bigotry against LGBTQIA people, and many more sicknesses that lead to death. What does it mean for us to live as people who overcome, who genuinely believe that love wins?

Lastly, I want to address Jesus' words, "You will always have the poor among you." This statement, which appears in each gospel, has been used by the wealthy to discourage Jesus' followers from working toward economic justice and social change. In this interpretation, Jesus' phrase is a prediction that trying to end poverty is futile, that poverty is an eternal social reality and there is nothing we can really do to prevent it. They would like us to think that all we can do to ease poverty in society is acts of charity and creating a society where poverty doesn't exist is impossible.

But this interpretation benefits those who are enriched by the status quo and don't want to see structural change. Charity is not justice, remember. Charity can ease injustice but leaves an unjust system unchanged.

I want to offer an alternative interpretation. Poverty is a human-made reality, and therefore poverty can be eradicated through our choices in how we structure our societies.

Consider this passage from the Tora:

"At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite. They shall not require payment from anyone among their own people, because the LORD'S time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. You may require

payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your fellow Israelite owes you. However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today." (Deuteronomy 15:1-5)

This passage states that there doesn't need to be "poor people" among Israelites. They are being given instruction on how to eradicate poverty. Later in the same chapter, we read, "There will always be poor people in *the land* [i.e. the surrounding societies outside of Israel]. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward *your fellow Israelites* who are poor and needy in *your land* [as opposed to the larger societies in which poverty will always exist because the way those societies are shaped] (italics and capitalization added).

I don't believe Jesus' words in John about poor people should be interpreted as establishing as an existential reality that poverty is an eternal, unchangeable given for our world. Even if one does, however, then we can read Jesus as saying that Israelite society has become like the surrounding nations in Deuteronomy where poverty "will always exist" because of their structure. Jesus words here are an indictment of

his society's rejection of the mandate to forgive debts every seven years. Therefore, they were choosing to structure their society by immortalizing poverty as the surrounding nations in Deuteronomy 15 had. These choices can be reversed. We can structure our societies differently. The early Jesus followers in the book of Acts eradicated poverty from their own community in Jesus' name:

"With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus."

Remember, it was not that Jesus had died, but that he had been resurrected. His death had been reversed.

"And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that *there were no needy persons among them*. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales." (Acts 4:33-34, italics added)

Last year, I mentioned these words of Nelson Mandela and Gustavo Gutierrez in *Declaring War Against Poverty*:

"Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the action of human beings." (Nelson Mandela, in a 2005 speech at the Make Poverty History rally in London's

continued on page 4



Photo by Towfiqu Barbhuiya on pexels.com

Trafalgar Square)

"The poor person does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny. His or her existence is not politically neutral, and it is not ethically innocent. The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible. They are marginalized by our social and cultural world. They are the oppressed, exploited proletariat, robbed of the fruit of their labor and despoiled of their humanity. Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order." (Gustavo

Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, p. 44)

There is a lot to consider here.

How are you being called to be a conduit of love, healing, life, and life-giving in your own contexts, this week?

HeartGroup Application

1. Share something that spoke to you from this week's eSight/Podcast episode with your HeartGroup.
2. How do you perceive poverty as something that could be prevented in our society? What would our society have to incorporate in order to irradiate poverty? Discuss (and

imagine) with your group.

3. What can you do this week, big or small, to continue setting in motion the work of shaping our world into a safe, compassionate, just home for everyone?

Thanks for checking in with us, today.

Right where you are, keep living in love, choosing compassion, taking action, and working toward justice.

I love each of you dearly. ■



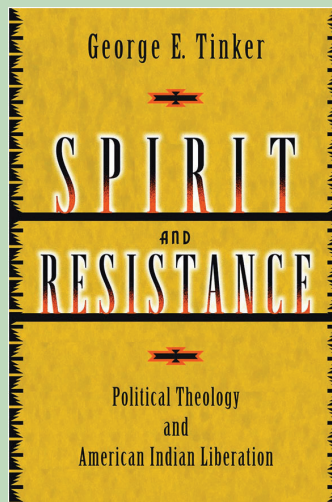
RHM's Recommended Reading for April

***Spirit and Resistance:
Political Theology and
American Indian Liberation***

by George E. Tinker

Writing from a Native American perspective, theologian George Tinker probes American Indian culture, its vast religious and cultural legacy, and its ambiguous relationship to the tradition—historic Christianity—that colonized and converted it.

After five hundred years of conquest and social destruction, he says, any useful reflection must come to terms with the political state of Indian affairs and the political hopes and visions for recovering the health and well-being of Indian communities. Does Christian theology have a positive role to play? Tinker's work offers an overview of contemporary native American culture and its perilous state. Critical of recent liberal and New Age co-opting of Native spiritual practices, Tinker also offers



a critical corrective to liberation theology. He shows how Native insights into the Sacred Other and sacred space helpfully reconfigure traditional ideas of God, Jesus' notion of the reign of God, and our relation to the earth. From this basis he offers novel proposals about cultural survival and identity, sustainability, and the endangered health of Native Americans.

Remember, you don't have to order this book through amazon.com, but if you do, please consider using Amazon Smile (smile.amazon.com) and selecting Renewed Heart Ministries as your designated charity for a portion of your purchase to be donated to RHM at no additional cost to you.

Weekly HeartGroup on Zoom Every Wednesday Night!

"I've experienced paradigm shifts in my thinking that are transforming my spiritual journey."

That's what one participant recently wrote. Each Wednesday evening, Glendale City Church hosts a Zoom-HeartGroup led by Herb Montgomery. Our discussion each week will focus on the content in Renewed Heart Ministries weekly eSight articles and the *Jesus For Everyone* podcast published each Friday. The time of each Zoom session will be on Wednesdays at 7:00 p.m. Pacific/10:00 p.m. Eastern.

Email us at:
info@renewedheartministries.com
for the link for the Zoom meeting.

SOCIAL JESUS

A Blog Exploring the Intersection of Faith and Societal Justice



Recent Posts from RHM's "Social Jesus" Blog on Patheos

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/



Excluded by Exclusion (Part 1 of 3)

"This week's story is not answering questions about who gets to heaven or not. The context of the narrative isn't about an afterlife at all. It's about social and political dynamics in this life."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/excluded-exclusion-part1/

Excluded by Exclusion (Part 2 of 3)

"'Sinner' was the pejorative label that those at the center of Jesus society used to marginalize whomever they chose."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/excluded-exclusion-part2/

Excluded by Exclusion (Part 3 of 3)

"As we are working toward a more inclusive, safe, compassionate, just society for everyone, if any are left out in the end, it won't because they themselves aren't welcome, but because they can't accept other people."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/excluded-exclusion-part3/



Injustice is Not Sustainable (Part 1 of 3)

"I don't hear the moralistic idea of repentance so many of us are used to

today. I hear a Jewish prophet of the poor calling for social change."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/injustice-sustainable-part1/

Injustice is Not Sustainable (Part 2 of 3)

"This is a good time to pause and reflect on how injustice is unsustainable in our day as well."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/injustice-sustainable-part2/

Injustice is Not Sustainable (Part 3 of 3)

"Democratic societies must be made to birth a distributively just society where the needs of everyone and not only an elite few are collectively met. The alternative is not sustainable."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/injustice-sustainable-part3/



Jesus as Political (Part 1 of 3)

"This phrase immediately triggers me and my more scientific modern worldview and I'd guess it does for many of you, too. But I want us to step outside of religious, supernatural definitions. Let's consider an interpretation through a more political lens."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/jesus-political-part1/

Jesus as Political (Part 2 of 3)

"Within this context, any systemic evil or injustice that becomes almost automated within a family, community, religious

structure, civil structure, corporation, government, or world power is a demon that must be exorcised."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/jesus-political-part2/

Jesus as Political (Part 3 of 3)

"Death is not conquered with more death, even just one more death. Death is conquered by love, life, and justice."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/jesus-political-part3/



Myth of Redemptive Sacrifice (Part 1 of 3)

"For many Christians, this weekend marks the first weekend of Lent, which commemorates the 40 days and nights that Jesus spends in the wilderness before embarking on his ministry of healing, liberation, inclusion, and establishing justice."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/myth-redemptive-sacrifice-part1/

Myth of Redemptive Sacrifice (Part 2 of 3)

"The means by which we obtain our bread—whether those means are just, life-giving, and sustainable—matters as much as the bread does. Bread alone is not life-giving enough."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/myth-redemptive-sacrifice-part2/

Myth of Redemptive Sacrifice (Part 2 of 3)

"This calls into question how we interpret Christian narratives of Jesus' death and resurrection as we walk through Lent toward Easter. I can think of no better way to begin the season of Lent than by calling into question the myth of redemptive suffering."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/03/myth-redemptive-sacrifice-part3/

continued on page 6



Encouragement When the Work is Lonely and Hard (Part 1 of 3)

"Christianity has become filled with anti-Semitic interpretations of the transfiguration. Here's an alternative."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/02/encouragement-work-lonely-hard-part1/

Encouragement When the Work is Lonely and Hard (Part 2 of 3)

"In this transfiguration story, the early Jesus followers are trying earnestly to make sense of the state violence against Jesus from the hands of the Roman empire."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/02/encouragement-work-lonely-hard-transfiguration-part2/

Encouragement When the Work is Lonely and Hard (Part 3 of 3)

"Have you had moments when you, also, have had to make some pretty difficult decisions? Moments where doing the right thing was not the easy choice?"

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2022/02/encouragement-work-lonely-hard-transfiguration-part3/

EPISODE 414: MARY'S PERFUME & NO MORE POVERTY

"I want to offer an alternative interpretation. Poverty is a human-made reality, and therefore poverty can be eradicated through our choices in how we structure our societies . . . I don't believe Jesus' words in John about poor people should be interpreted as establishing as an existential reality that poverty is an eternal, unchangeable given for our world."



New episodes every Friday!

The Jesus For Everyone podcast.

A weekly podcast where we talk about the intersection of faith and societal justice and what a first-century, Jewish prophet of the poor from Galilee offers us today in our work of compassion, love and justice.

renewedheartministries.com/Podcasts

Quotable Quotes

"The poor of this world—the Galilee of today—are where we encounter the historical Jesus and where he is encountered as liberator."

— Jon Sobrino;
Jesus the Liberator



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Renewed Heart Ministries is a nonprofit organization working for a world of love and justice. We need your support to impact lives and provide the kind of resources and analysis RHM offers.

Intersections between faith, love, compassion, and justice are needed today more than ever.

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to Renewed Heart Ministries, today.

To do so online go to renewedheartministries.com and click "Donate." Or if you prefer to make a donation by mail, our address is:

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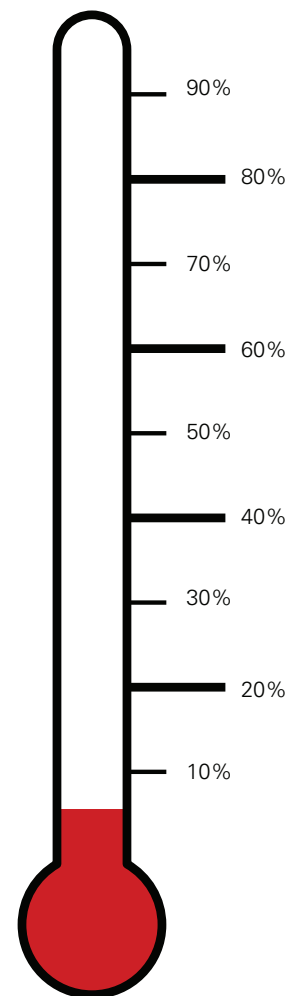
And to those of you out there who are already supporting this ministry, I want to say thank you. We continue being a voice for change because of your support.

**2022 Projected Budget Goal:
\$185,000.00**

**Donations Received
February 2022:
\$5,310.71**

**Donations Received
Year To Date:
\$9,820.06**

**Whether you give
\$5 or \$5,000,
every amount helps us
continue our work.**



Quotable Quotes

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred

silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed."

— Matthew; 18:23–34

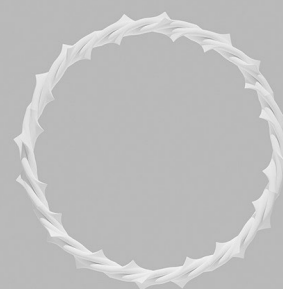


Photo by Payton Tuttle on Unsplash.com

Renewed Heart Ministries is a not-for-profit group that is passionate about rediscovering, following and helping others rediscover the teachings and sayings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. We believe these teachings have an intrinsic value in informing the work of nonviolently confronting, liberating and transforming our world into a safe, more just, more compassionate home for us all.

Everything we do here at Renewed Heart Ministries is for free. Even the many educational events that we hold in various venues. You can support our work either with a one-time gift or by becoming one of our monthly contributors by going to RenewedHeartMinistries.com and clicking the **donate** tab at the top right.

Or you can mail contributions to:
Renewed Heart Ministries
P.O. Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

Also, please sign up for our free resources and remember, every little bit helps.

And to those already supporting the work of Renewed Heart Ministries, your generous support makes it possible for us to exist and to continue being a presence for positive change in our world. So with all of our hearts, "Thank You."

Together we are making a difference, till the only world that remains is a world where only Love reigns.

RENEWED
HEART
MINISTRIES



Front cover artwork by Ali Montgomery.

"You have the power to be an agent of change in your everyday living; you can influence your posse to also be the change you seek. And ultimately, together, in community, small steps can lead to morally courageous behavior that loves the world all the way to healing."

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS
FIERCE LOVE
(PP. 168)

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