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Mary, Christian Patriarchy and the Existence of Poverty

by Herb Montgomery

Our reading this month 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)

I understand why this passage is a Lectionary favorite during this season. Before we speak of whether poverty is inevitable or optional, let's take a look at the woman named Mary mentioned in John's version of the story.

John's version of this story is very different from any of the other gospel versions of this story. In John's version, we are in Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' home. Mary's act is one of gratitude, specifically for the events of the previous chapter. In the previous chapter, Lazarus, Mary's brother, had gotten sick and died, and Jesus brought him back from the dead to live again.

Let's also consider the other versions of this story in the gospels.

In Mark, the earliest version of this story, this event takes place not at Mary, Martha and Lazarus' home but at the home of a leper named Simon.

"While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head." (Mark 14:3-4)

Matthew's gospel repeats to a large degree Mark's version:

"While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table." (Matthew 26:6-7)

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THANK YOU.

Front cover artwork by Ali Montgomery.

Mary... continued from page 2

In Luke, we get a different version. Simon is no longer a leper; he's now a Pharisee. This fits Luke's overarching theme of Jesus being in conflict with the more nationalist sectors of the Pharisee community. And the woman is not nameless as in the previous gospels, but a woman who had "lived a sinful life." This evolved detail also fits conflict growing in Luke of certain Pharisees being upset with Jesus' association with tax collectors and "sinners."

"When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them." (Luke 7:36-38)

But in our reading this week, we are in Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' home, not the home of Simon the Leper (Mark and Matthew) or Simon the Pharisee (Luke). The woman who interacts with Jesus is Mary of Bethany (Martha and Lazarus' sister), not a woman who has lived a sinful life (Luke), nor an unnamed, morally upright woman who simply wants to anoint Jesus' body before his death (Mark and Matthew).

What I believe is most important in all these versions of this story is that the woman mentioned is definitely not Mary Magdalene. Why is this clarification important?

In the early Jesus movement, Mary Magdalene was both an influential leader in the early movement and a symbol of support for women in leadership in the early church.

Beginning in the 4th Century, though, we witness a shift to disparage women leaders, and Christianity moved toward a purely patriarchal form. The different versions of this story played a part in this history

By the close of the 6th Century, Pope Gregory's sermon conflates all these women to disparage Mary Magdalene. It calls Mary Magdalene a "sinful" prostitute, furthering the patriarchy's accusation that women are innately morally inferior to men, and it forever changed Mary Magdalene's reputation: she is never referred to as a prostitute in the gospels. It is interesting that the Eastern Orthodox Church never made Pope Gregory's error of conflating Mary of Magdala with Mary of Bethany but kept them as separate and distinct figures. Thus, Mary Magdalene in the Eastern tradition was also never conflated with Luke's "sinful" woman and never believed to have been a prostitute.

I want to say here that women whose work is prostitution should be valued in the same way as any other human being. Work is work. At the same time, prostitution today is very dangerous work due to its legal status and other social stigmas. We need to move away from using "prostitute" as a derogatory or disparaging slur.

The transition in the 4th to 6th Centuries that took Mary Magdalene from an influential early church leader to a "sinful" prostitute advanced the goals by the patriarchy of disparaging women as leaders in the Western Christian church.

One more note about Luke's gospel. Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany and the woman who anoints Jesus are always portrayed as distinct and separate women in Luke's narratives.

In Luke 7 we have the woman who with the alabaster box. This story ends with Jesus blessing this woman.

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:50)

In the very next chapter (Luke 8), we read:

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. (Luke 8:1-3)

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**"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep, for
you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people
hate you, that is how
they treated the prophets."**



The Social Jesus Podcast

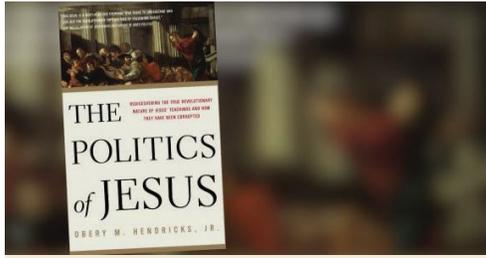
A podcast where we talk about the intersection of faith and social justice, and what a first-century, Jewish, prophet of the poor from Galilee offers us today in our work of love, compassion and justice.

Find The Social Jesus Podcast at:

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April's Recommended Reading

The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted

by Obery M. Hendricks Jr.

Who was Jesus? And how was this first-century political revolutionary, whose teachings are meant to lead the way to freedom, turned into a meek and mild servant of the status quo? How is it possible to profess a belief in Jesus, yet ignore the suffering of the poor and the needy? Just how truly faithful to the vision of Jesus are the many politicians who claim to be Christian? These are the kinds of questions Obery Hendricks, a biblical scholar, activist, and minister, asks in this provocative new book. In this day and age of heated political debate, Hendricks's *The Politics of Jesus* stands out as much for its brilliant recreation of the life and mind of Jesus of Nazareth as for its scathing critique of modern politicians "of faith."



Upcoming Events

APRIL 19, 2025

Good News Fellowship
Toronto, Ontario Canada

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Mary... continued from page 3

Luke refers to Mary here as "called Magdalene" (from Magdala in Galilee) "out of whom seven demons were cast out." Luke could have easily said this was Mary, the same sinful woman I was just writing about! But no, this Mary is a new woman added to the story, and she financially supported Jesus in his work.

In addition, Luke also mentions Mary of Bethany. In Luke 10, she and Martha are still sisters, but they have no brother named Lazarus in Luke's gospel. Mary of Bethany is an additional woman in the story.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. (Luke 10:38-19)

So, in Luke, we have the woman in Luke 7, Mary of Magdala (Galilee) in Luke 8, and Mary, Martha's sister, of Bethany (Judea, outside Jerusalem) in Luke 10. Never does Luke even remotely hint that these three are all the same women.

By the time we get to the last gospel in our canon, John has now lifted this story from being about a sinful woman to being about Mary of Bethany, Martha's sister. In John's version she has a brother named Lazarus whom Jesus raises from the dead.

"Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) (John 11:1-2)

It's curious that Luke never mentions Lazarus as the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany. Stop and ponder that. Luke never mentions something so significant in John's gospel as to be the cause of Jesus' crucifixion. In Luke, Jesus is crucified not because he raises Lazarus but because of his protest in the temple courtyard with the money changers. Why is this significant?

So many Christians take Jesus' words in our reading to mean that there is nothing we can do about the inevitability of poverty. After all, Jesus says here, "The poor you will always have with you."

However we interpret this statement, we should acknowledge its roots in the book of Deuteronomy:

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. For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you. **If** anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. **There will always be poor people in the land.** Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:1-11, emphasis added.)

In this instance, Jesus may have been saying it was okay for them to care for him rather than the poor. In Mark 14:7, he says "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help

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SOCIAL JESUS

A Blog Exploring the Intersection of Faith and Societal Justice



Recent Social Jesus Blog Posts on Patheos:



Social Justice Lessons from the Prodigal Son (Part 1 of *We Won't Be Great Until Everyone Is Great*)

In the prodigal story, the label “sinner” was assigned to anyone being politically or socially marginalized

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/social-justice-lessons-prodigal-son/



When Sinner Only Means Different (Part 2 of *We Won't Be Great Until Everyone Is Great*)

They were simply different. Applying the term sinner to this group only served to socially and politically marginalize.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/sinner-different/



The Prodigal Teaches We Aren't Great Until Everyone Is Great (Part 3 of *We Won't Be Great Until Everyone Is Great*)

It wasn't enough to enable more people to compete for power. The prodigal story envisions a world where we rise by lifting each other up.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/prodigal-great-everyone/



Social Repentance (Part 1 of *Social Repentance Not Private Piety*)

Our reading isn't about personal, private repentance for individual misdeeds. Like the Hebrew prophets of old, it's about social repentance.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/social-repentance/



The Tower of Siloam (Part 2 of *Social Repentance Not Private Piety*)

Next in our reading is the tower of Siloam. This example is much more cryptic. There are no surviving historical accounts of this event.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/tower-siloam/



Lent and the Present Social Crisis (Part 3 of *Social Repentance Not Private Piety*)

Systems of injustice are never sustainable. This year's Lent can be superficial and temporary or long-lasting, deep, and life-giving.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/lent-present-social-crisis/



Herod the Fox and Saying No to Those in Power

(Part 1 of *The Courage to Stand Up to Harm*)

Standing up to power and saying, “No,” was central to the Hebrew, prophetic, justice tradition as Jesus does toward Herod in our reading.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/saying-no-those-power/



Standing Up to Injustice (Part 2 of *The Courage to Stand Up to Harm*)

All of this causes me to consider those courageously standing up against brutal acts being perpetrated in the name of efficiency today.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/standing-up-injustice/



Courage to Stand Up Today (Part 3 of *The Courage to Stand Up to Harm*)

In the face of so many who are being hurt right now, may we, too, find the same courage our reading this week models.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/03/courage-stand-up-today/



Weekly YouTube Show! *Just Talking* with Herb and Todd

Each week, we'll be talking about the gospel lectionary reading for the upcoming weekend. We'll be talking about each reading in the context of love, inclusion, and social justice. Our hope is that our talking will be *just talking* (as in justice) and that during our brief conversations each week you'll be inspired to also do more than just talking.

If you teach from the lectionary each week, or if you're just looking for some thoughts on the Jesus story from a more progressive perspective within the context of social justice, check it out, you might like it.

You can find the latest show on YouTube [@herbandtoddjusttalking](https://www.youtube.com/@herbandtoddjusttalking).

Please Like, Subscribe, hit the Notification button, and leave us a comment. All of this will help us get this new YouTube channel off the ground.

Thanks in advance for watching!

What people are saying about *Just Talking* –

“I’m definitely enjoying these discussions. Helps clearly bring the love and teachings of Jesus into focus for me.”

–Commenter

Mary... continued from page 4

them any time you want. But you will not always have me.” Jesus may also have been making a proclamation against the greed of their society, saying that because they refused to follow the debt cancellation and wealth redistribution of Deuteronomy, they would “always” have people in poverty among them. However we interpret these words, we must remember that Jesus’ gospel was good news to the poor. Jesus’ politics were good news for the poor. For Jesus, the concrete, material needs of the people were holy.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim *good news* to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free.” (Luke 4:18, italics added)

So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard:

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the *good news* is proclaimed to the poor.”
(Luke 7:22, italics added)

To say that poverty is inevitable and there’s nothing we can do to eliminate it is not good news to the poor. It fails the litmus test here and it is contrary to the gospel of Jesus.

I close this week with two statements for us to ponder, one by the late Nelson Mandela and the other by the late Gustavo Gutierrez.

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 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)

This time in the Christian yearly calendar is about course corrections and recommitting our lives to the gospel of Jesus. This year, maybe one of the matters we should repent of is that poverty exists among us as Christians and as a society.

I love each of you dearly, I’ll see you next month. ■

Weekly HeartGroup on Zoom Every Wednesday Night!

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.

To receive the link for the Zoom meeting, email us at: info@renewedheartministries.com



The work of helping people find life-giving ways to live out their faith through love, compassion, and justice are needed now more than ever. At Renewed Heart Ministries, we provide resources of faith and healing with the aim of renewing hope and inspiring action as we allow the Jesus story to inform each of us as we work together to shape our world into a compassionate, just and safe home for everyone.



Renewed Heart Ministries is a 501(c)3, grassroots ministry on the margins that prioritizes the needs of marginalized communities, especially those who have been the recipients of misinformed, faith-based harm. Your support enables us to be a life-giving, healing light in our faith communities and continue to be a voice for desperately needed change.

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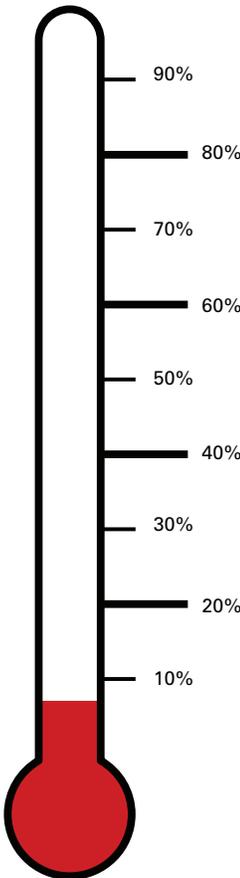
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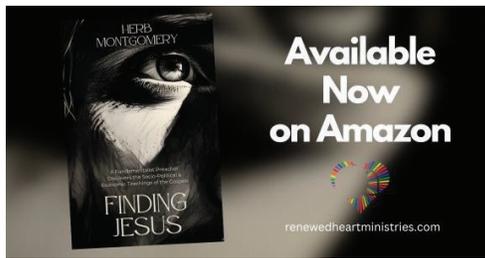


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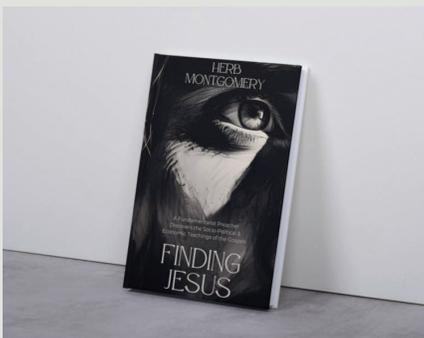
***Finding Jesus:
A Fundamentalist
Preacher Discovers
the Socio-Political &
Economic Teachings of
the Gospels***

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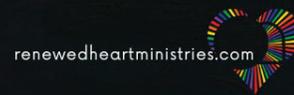
In *Finding Jesus*, author Herb Montgomery delves into the profound and often overlooked political dimensions of the gospels. Through meticulous analysis of biblical texts, historical context, and social discourse, this thought-provoking book unveils the gospels' socio-political, economic teachings as rooted in a profound concern for justice, compassion, and the well-being of the marginalized. The book navigates the intersections between faith and societal justice, presenting a compelling argument for a more socially engaged and transformative Christianity.

Finding Jesus is not just a scholarly exploration; it is a call to action. It challenges readers to reevaluate their understanding of Christianity's role in public life and to consider how the radical teachings of the gospels can inspire a renewed commitment to justice, equality, and compassion. This book is a must-read for those seeking a deeper understanding of the social implications of Christian faith and a blueprint for building a more just and inclusive society.



“The world doesn’t get great unless we all get better. If there is such a thing as salvation, then we are not saved until everyone is saved; our dignity and liberation are bound together.”

**Dr. Jacqui Lewis
Fierce Love**



“ The resurrection is God’s definitive victory over crucifying powers of evil. Ironically, the power that attempts to destroy Jesus on the cross is actually itself destroyed by the cross. The cross represents the power that denigrates human bodies, destroys life, and preys on the most vulnerable in society. As the cross is defeated, so too is that power. The impressive factor is how it is defeated. It is defeated by a life-giving rather than a life-negating force. God’s power, unlike human power, is not a “master race” kind of power. That is, it is not a power that diminishes the life of another so that others might live. God’s power respects the integrity of all human bodies and the sanctity of all life. This is a resurrecting power. Therefore, God’s power never expresses itself through the humiliation or denigration of another. It does not triumph over life. It conquers death by resurrecting life. The force of God is a death-negating, life-affirming force. This is significant in two ways. The black feminist literary artist and social critic Audre Lorde once said, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” What the crucifixion–resurrection event reveals is that God does not use the master’s tools. God does not fight death with death. God does not utilize the violence exhibited in the cross to defeat deadly violence itself. As Lorde suggest, while this may bring a temporary solution, it does not bring an end to the culture of death itself. Rather, one stays entrapped in that very culture. The culture of death is thus granted power over life. As such, “only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.” If indeed the power of life that God stands for is greater than the power of death, then this must be manifest in the way God triumphs over death-dealing powers. The freedom of God that is life requires a liberation from the very weapons utilized by a culture of death. In other words, these weapons cannot become divine weapons. This liberation was foreshadowed by Jesus’ refusal to cooperate with the powers of death at the time of his crucifixion. The culmination of this liberation is Jesus’ resurrection. ”

– Kelly Brown Douglas

Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God, p. 182-183