

“Pay Attention”
Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14;
John 12:1-8

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What are you confident about? If you were to say, “This is something I know,” or “This is somebody I’m very confident in,” what would you say? Who would you identify? What things are you confident about? I thought about this because Paul starts off this passage in Philippians talking about confidence. So where do we put our confidence?

I discovered this week that Herman Melville wrote more books than just *Moby Dick*. One was called *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. When I was thinking about confidence, the phrase “confidence man” came to mind. What does that phrase mean? In the book there are two characters toward the end of the book who are talking about a warning one was reading and he says, “The warning was such as this: ‘With much smooth words he will tempt you; he will smile at you, and be well-spoken towards you, and ask what you want. If he can make a profit from you, he will use you; he will trick you into bearing the losses, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When you hear these things, awake from your sleep.’” And one of the sleepers in one of the berths asks, “Who’s that describing the confidence-man?”

I was thinking about that term “the confidence-man” because it suggests one that gains our confidence in a way that he can use that confidence for something else. Really, the whole book is about that. But Paul is also talking about the confidence man in his own life. He’s talking about how, for him, being a Hebrew, an Israelite, having grown up with the law and being able to know it all, had been in a way his confidence man, that in which he had put his faith, his trust, his confidence. He found that it hadn’t led him where he thought it would. So Paul is talking about the confidence man in his own life.

What it felt like to me as I began to listen to this passage from John is that a couple of confidence men show up in that passage. Judas is the confidence man of sorts in the passage. The first confidence that he made me think about was when he suggests that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. It’s a simple solution to an age-old problem. Just give the money to the poor.

There are a couple of things it makes me think about. Perhaps it’s not that simple. Sometimes I wonder if some of the problems we face and think about and identify as the problems we need to address are not really the problem, but instead are simply the symptoms of a problem. So there’s that question that comes to mind.

And yet as I look at this idea of a simple way to address our problems, it’s very appealing to me to think there are very simple ways to address our problems, especially age-old problems. Jesus acknowledges that at the end when he says, “The poor are always with you.” This is an age-old problem. The confidence man in me wants to say, “There’s a simple answer: just give money.”

Now I'm not suggesting, as we think about One Great Hour of Sharing, that there isn't something really valuable about giving, particularly at crisis times. That initial gift can make huge changes over a long term. But if we don't look at something beyond the simplicity of an answer, perhaps we're missing something. Perhaps questions that seem to be pretty simple have much greater depth and need to be addressed in much deeper ways or even different ways than the initial presenting problem.

So that's just one idea of a confidence man that might show up here is the idea that we just want things to have a simple answer and be done. I know that's one for me.

The second one that Judas is using is deflection. In some ways he's bringing up this idea of a simple solution so that people won't think about the real reason he wants the perfume sold and the money to come in. We could go on and look at his motives, but I want to focus on the idea of deflection, of suggesting something else so they don't have to deal with this other problem.

That's another confidence man in my own life. It's very easy to want to come up with reasons for doing something that seems simpler or focusing on some issue so I don't have to deal with the real issue that's going on inside me. It's that sense of deflecting so I don't have to get to the root of it, don't have to deal with it, don't have to recognize it.

So here are a couple of those confidence men I think show up in this passage and I certainly see in my own life. The idea that I just want it to be simple, or deflect it away so I won't have to deal with it now, or perhaps never, if I can just keep deflecting.

It feels that's exactly what's happening when we have Jesus present, as well. What Judas is willing to do is to tell Jesus, "Why didn't you have her do this?" In the end, as Jesus goes to Jerusalem, isn't that the whole idea behind what's being said? "We don't want to listen to you, Jesus, because we want the simple answer." It feels to me like what we are beginning to see is how our confidence men, whatever they may be in our lives, are given more of our confidence than what God might be doing. In fact, so much confidence that we might miss what God is doing right in our midst. Or we put so much confidence in them that we don't want that confidence to be shaken by one who comes from God to tell us something different. It feels a little bit like the whole reason Jesus ends up on the cross is because they didn't want to hear him give them a different way to move their confidence from one thing to a movement of God amongst them.

So all I want to suggest from these passages are that they begin to make me wonder what I give confidence to and how is it that I might give confidence to things like the simple answer or the ways I deflect, rather than to Jesus.

What I love about this passage from John is that it's very olfactory. You've got this sense of the perfume filling the air. What it brings to my mind is, what smells in my life? Where's that perfume? When do I begin to smell that perfume? It's actually a perfume of death because what Jesus says is, "She's bought it to use for my body." In some

ways, she's already anointing him for his death. So what I'm saying is that when that perfume comes up in our own life, it is that way in which, instead of bringing Jesus into our life, it's leading Jesus to the cross. It's the ways we reject him rather than accept him, rather than see the presence of God among us. Because we're looking for simple answers to age-old questions or we're deflecting things or for some other reason, we don't want to pay attention to what God might be doing.

Our invitation is to see where that perfume is in our lives. Where are those moments when we begin to recognize or can recognize our own ways of rejecting Jesus because we've got some other confidence man in our life? That's enough to notice and wonder about.

God is present. So are the confidence men. Let's sniff them out. Amen.