For over twenty years, on nearly a weekly basis, I have heard people quote Matthew 26:11, “the poor will be with you always” to blame the poor for their poverty, to justify inaction in the face of growing poverty and misery, and to claim that if God wanted to end poverty, He would do so. This passage led me to seminary and biblical scholarship and eventually to write a book on these misinterpretations with Eerdmanns Press (Always With Us?: What Jesus Really Said About the Poor, April 2017).

I started noticing how dominant such punitive interpretations of this passage were while I was working with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless – two organizations led by poor and homeless people themselves organizing to get their families and entire communities up and out of poverty. Politicians, religious leaders, and others quoted Matthew 26:11 (and the parallels in John 12 and Mark 14) to justify shutting down housing programs and kicking mothers and their babies off of public assistance in the lead up to the 1996 Welfare Reform Act.

These leaders, many of them self-described Christians, ignored the majority of passages from the Bible; passages like, “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing homeless children.” (Isaiah 10:1-2), “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you….The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.” (James 5:1-6), and “God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53)

They failed to see the moral and political agency of poor and homeless people who — much like early Christian communities — were taking care of each other and building safe and vibrant communities, although they were forced to live without adequate housing, food, education, or healthcare. These poor families proposed policies and programs similar to the jubilee prescriptions from Deuteronomy and Leviticus and the collection for the poor in Paul’s letters. They advocated for an end to poverty that would benefit all people and resisted welfare cuts and draconian policies that punished the poor and benefited the wealthy.
These politicians and others put forward ahistorical, non-contextual, and unethical (mis)interpretations and (mis)appropriations of biblical texts, like Matthew 26:11 and 2 Thessalonians 3:10 (“if you do not work, you shall not eat”). They deliberately ignored Isaiah 10:1-2, James 5:1-6 and Luke 1:52-53, among many others. They rarely referenced the truly radical economic teachings of the Bible: “Blessed are the poor for theirs shall be the Kingdom of God” (Matthew 6); “No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money.” (Matthew 26:4); and “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Luke 18:22). The only preachers I heard talking about poverty were those who condemned the poor as sinners. Very few people talked about how poverty itself is a sin against God that could and should be ended.

In my book, *Always With Us?: What Jesus Really Said About the Poor*, I reinterpret the passage, “the poor you will always have with you” to show that it is actually one of the strongest Biblical mandates to end poverty. The book documents stories of poor people organizing to end poverty and shows how their struggles articulate and embody a truly liberative theology. Poverty is not inevitable. It is a systemic sin, and all Christians have a responsibility to partner with the poor to end poverty once and for all.

Indeed, that line from Matthew 26:11 is what evangelical leader, Jim Wallis, calls the most famous Bible verse on poverty. The verse echoes Deuteronomy 15 and calls for radical economic distribution as central for community prosperity. I hear echoes of this verse when I read Dr. King’s statement on true compassion from his *Time to Break the Silence* sermon at The Riverside Church on April 4, 1967. Indeed, this may well be Rev. Dr. King’s interpretation of Matthew 26:11:

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

Matthew 26:11 takes place in the context of a meal with his disciples, the last supper, when a woman comes and pours an alabaster jar of ointment, *muron*, on his head and right before Judas decides to betray Jesus by turning him over to be crucified. With
this action, the woman anoints Jesus. He becomes Christ in this scene. But the disciples don’t understand the significance (of the anointing, of Jesus’ impending execution at the hands of the state). They critique the woman for wasting the ointment (using apoleia – the Greek word for destroying) by pouring it on Jesus’ head, anointing him Messiah and prophet, preparing him for his burial. They say that instead of breaking the jar, they could have taken the nard and sold it for a year’s salary and given the money to the poor.

The suggestion of the disciples follows the dominant economic systems of the Roman empire. Indeed, this idea of earning lots of money and giving the proceeds to the poor follows how we think we’re supposed to address poverty in today’s society – by doing charity work, by buying and selling and then donating to the poor, but never questioning how poverty was created in the first place. So, when Jesus responds to the disciples, he quotes Deuteronomy 15, one of the most radical Sabbath and Jubilee prescriptions in the Bible. Deuteronomy 15 says that there will be no poor person among you if you follow the commandments God is giving today – those commandments are to forgive debts, release slaves, and lend money even knowing you won’t get paid back. Deuteronomy 15 continues and says that because people will not follow those commandments, there will always be poor among you.

Therefore, when Jesus quotes this phrase, he isn’t condoning poverty, he is reminding us that God hates poverty, has commanded us to end poverty by forgiving debts, by raising wages, by outlawing slavery, by restructuring society around the needs of the poor. He is reminding the disciples that charity and hypocrisy will not end poverty but keep poverty with us always. He is reminding his followers that he is going to be killed for bringing God’s reign here on earth and it is their responsibility to continue the quest for justice.

I believe that Jesus’ instruction to do justice is like the concept of “costly grace” that Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses in his book The Cost of Discipleship. Bonhoeffer lived from 1906 to 1945; one of the "Heroes of Conscience" who returned to Germany to join the fight against Hitler, Bonhoeffer was among the many outstanding leaders, pastors, and scholars who serve as an inspiration around the world to all those who, on grounds of conscience, are forced to protest the violation of human rights. He writes: “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace.”

Bonhoeffer’s concept of “costly grace” echoes a quote I use at the end of Always With Us? from Toni Morrison’s book, Beloved. Morrison writes:
She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.\(^1\)

Indeed, this quote resonates with some slogans from KWRU and the Union of the Homeless who put me on the path to biblical scholarship in the first place. Slogans like “no housing, no peace,” “you only get what you’re organized to take,” “each one, teach one so we can reach one more” insist that the poor have power and agency and can wake up this democracy.

But too often we forsake the belief that ending poverty is possible. Instead of realizing the resurrection of Jesus and all of his disciples who stand for justice, we ignore the controversial, revolutionary nature of a poor, resurrected Jesus as Lord and Savior, who challenges the wealthy, immortalized Caesar. We forget that Jesus’s Kingdom includes economic and social rights in the here and now and that the Messiah Jesus came to usher in this reign. The good news of the Bible has been reduced to an individualized acceptance of Jesus Christ as a Lord and Savior, severed from his mission to the world. We deny that the poor are at the center of God’s concern, ignoring that Jesus was a leader of a revolutionary movement of the poor, who—rather than mitigating the unfortunate inevitability of poverty—called for a movement to transform heaven and earth.

Jesus came to bring good news to the poor. We will follow in his footsteps?

\(^1\) Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1994), 130.