Sunday, February 3, 1974
WONDERFULLY IRRELEVANT
Matthew 26:6-13

One of the more popular words in our time, one of the “in” words is the word “relevant.” We are practical people, and we want above all else to be “relevant.” Particularly in the church and in religious circles the idea of being relevant is a favorite one.

Partly what is meant by this is that everything we do must have an immediate practical value which we can see and measure. At the same time, we are often told by many of the church’s critics both from within and from without that the church is too irrelevant. A few years ago, this took the form of a number of ministers and others leaving the work of the church in the usual sense so that they could be “relevant” all the time in some kind of completely action-oriented activity.

Well, I don’t know about you, but sometimes I get a little tired of trying to b. “relevant” all the time. Sometimes I want to do things that are totally and wonderfully irrelevant. I also find. some comfort in the fact that the conflict between relevance and irrelevance is not a new one. In fact, our scripture lesson this morning from the Gospel of Matthew was about this very issue.

Jesus had come to the house of Simon the leper in Bethany. While he was there, a woman, perhaps someone who had only followed him at a distance up to this point, came to him and in a gesture of worship and adoration, anointed him with a jar of very expensive ointment. Some commentators have suggested that the value of the ointment in terms of today’s money would be about $240.00

Her unblocked impulse deeply moved Jesus. He liked the spontaneity of the act. It was not smothered by caution and prudence. She did not pour out a few drops and say-- “Well, I guess that ought to be enough for this occasion.” She was lifted completely out of herself in act of great devotion and love.

But it wasn’t a very practical thing or relevant thing to do. And some of those present said just that! They were indigent and asked, “Why this waste? This ointment might have been sold for a large sum of money and the proceeds given to the poor.”

The poverty in Palestine in those days was a grim and dread-ful fact. Housing conditions were not good, there was high unemployment. There were many poor people. So, the disciples asked, “Why this waste?” The ointment that the woman used so devotedly on Jesus could’ve been sold and the money distributed. to the poor. Yet here was this fool woman wasting it for no end or point at all in an idiotic fashion.

Thus, we see the conflict between what is relevant and ir-relevant. To the onlookers who protested, every act had to pass the test of relevance and practicality here and now. These were some of the same disciples who wanted to keep the little children from Jesus at another point in his ministry. They thought that also a waste of time. Why should he spend his precious time talking and playing with children when there were so many important and relevant things that needed to be done?

The verdict of those shocked onlookers, the disciples, is the same as many people today. It is the opinion of those who see most worship, celebrations, parties, festivities, and fantasies as not being feasible, as being irrelevant.

Many people hot and eager about social reform and impatient for the betterment of material conditions see the church as nothing more or less than an irritating irrelevance, its labors a sheer nuisance. What's relevant or practical, they ask, in singing hymns, or saying prayers. Such things, they go on to say, turn people aside from the relevant things which need to be done.

And of course, we have to admit that the danger is always present that we will completely turn aside. It is presenting all of life. We can use anything as an escape or cop-out. Yet the desire to be relevant all the time can in it- self be an evasion.

Thus, Jesus rebuked the disciples. He said, "She has done a beautiful thing." There is a place for this kind of irrelevance. There is a place for it in all devotion. There is a place for this kind of irrelevance in our worship, or in the beauty of a cathedral or in other architectural forms. There is a place for it in the beauty of a fine piece of music or in a ballet. There is a place for this kind of irrelevance in the great poetry and great art.

These things do not pass the so-called test of relevancy, of immediate practicality or feasibility. There is also the beauty and irrelevance of the unsolicited gift, the surprise which springs from the imagination of love.

Actually, much of what we do in this world is "wonderfully irrelevant," just like the woman pouring out the costly ointment, and Jesus was all for it! Perhaps we need much more of the "wonderfully irrelevant" in our own time and in our lives.

Think of it! A rose garden has no practical value — it is wonderfully irrelevant. Dancing, just for the sheer joy of dancing has no practical value. It too is wonderfully irrelevant. Such things do not feed the hungry or clothe the poor, but Jesus would have us appreciate and plant the roses and he calls us to dance in this world.

Pretty clothes, ribbons and bows, a new winter or spring hat, all are more wonderfully irrelevant things. We could just as well wear simple practical clothes with little or no tai1oring or decorations — they would also keep our bodies warm and covered. Going to a circus, or the zoo, a picnic in the park, all are wonderfully irrelevant activities. And what could be more wonderfully irrelevant than a beautiful white wedding gown? A bride wears it once and then hangs it in a closet, but Jesus would be all for it.

A nicely furnished house or apartment can also be wonderfully irrelevant. Why spend all that money on nice furniture and matching drapes? Simple shades that pull down would do. And why have all that beautiful China and silverware? Plain practical dishes would do. Why have dinner parties where we sit down together and laugh and eat and enjoy ourselves and play games? Yet along with Jesus, we can count these as being wonderfully irrelevant!

Viewing the many-colored autumn leaves and planting flower gardens in the spring are certainly irrelevant to the problems of the world. By the completely practical minded person they might be considered a waste of time. What practi-cal value is there in those things, they would ask.

Taking a slow walk in the rain, just walking, going nowhere, it's wonderfully irrelevant. Or collecting stamps or whatever other hobby we might pursue for fun and not profit--all are wonderfully irrelevant. Flying a kite and fishing for fun are also wonderfully irrelevant.

Most sports are wonderfully irrelevant. Sometimes we try to stretch a point and look for all kinds of practical value in them — they teach teamwork, they make money, we say, as we try to justify the fun we're having. But why not just have fun instead of looking for all sorts of practical justifications? What could be more wonderfully irrelevant than a softball game, boys and girls, men, and women, hitting and running and catching, panting for breath, and laughing. If we try to make such thing too relevant, too practical, we destroy the fun such things can be.

Or what could be more wonderfully irrelevant than 50,000 people taking an afternoon off and going to a baseball game or football game, eating hotdogs, and cheering lustily. But if we take the game so seriously that we are depressed for two days, if our team loses, then that sport is no longer wonderfully irrelevant.

Well, the list could go on and on containing those wonderfully irrelevant activities that we all like to engage in. the laughing and joking, the playing of games, and all of the arts.

I don't know about you, but I get awfully tired of those people who are all the time so dreadfully serious, who never seem to laugh, to have fun, who never seem to take part in some of the wonderfully irrelevant things in this world.

That's the trouble with the religion of many people. There is never any ecstasy, no hop, skip, or jump, just a dutiful trudge. In our Christian faith we are called to dance, to have a touch of divine madness, to be fools for Christ. But some people never dance for joy, they walk solemnly and arthritically to the cemetery.

Several years ago, in a book by Harvey Cox entitled the "Feast of Fools," we were reminded that during the Middle Ages there flourished in parts of Europe, a holiday known as the "Feast of Fools." On that occasion, even ordinary pious priests and serious townsfolk donned bawdy masks, sang outrageous ditties, and generally kept the whole world awake with revelry and satire, with festivity and gaiety, with irrelevance and fantasy.

Minor clerics painted their faces, strutted about in the robes of their superiors, and mocked the stately rituals of the church and court.

It must've been something like the "grid-iron" dinners that are held in Lincoln, and in other parts of the country.

As you can imagine, the Feast of Fools was never very popular with the higher-ups and during the age of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, it gradually died out. Its death was a loss to all of us. It helped people imagine at least once in a while, a wholly different kind of world — once where the first became last and the last first, where the accepted values were turned upside down. We can't be always totally relevant and serious.

That must've been part of the difference between Jesus and John the Baptist. John was always serious, preaching dreadful judgment, fire, and brimstone, and of course there's a place for that. But he was so serious, so relevant, that he couldn't understand at times what Jesus was doing.

Jesus, on the other hand, was called by his enemies a glutton and a winebibber. There is evidence that he liked to go to parties, that he was a welcome guest because he could have so much fun with people doing wonderfully irrele-vant things, as well as being serious and concerned about people and the problems of the world. For John the Baptist there was a world to change, and he had no time for anything else.

Jesus could understand John, but he still liked what the woman did when she anointed him with the expensive ointment, and he didn't rebuke the woman but rebuked those who were critical of her.

Perhaps what we need in our kind of world is more of the spirit of Jesus and that woman rather than the spirit of John the Baptist. Perhaps what we need more than anything else is to do some wonderfully irrelevant things too. Our worship here together needs to have its moments of light-ness and relaxation as well as its more serious solemn times.

Candles and flowers are as wonderfully irrelevant as the songs of birds; hymns and chants are as nonutilitarian as a lover's kiss; prayers and litanies are just words, cheap as children's smiles. And yet that is the whole point of it. Worship too, is to be wonderfully irrelevant.

Our history is filled with persons who "wasted" themselves and were not afraid to do so. They were not afraid of giving themselves away and of giving things away in the service of a new creation. They gave out of the fullness of themselves as did as did the woman in this story from the Bible. It might be called "holy waste." God's love and care for us has a lovely lack of common sense.

Many people today are sick not only because they have not received love, but also because they have not allowed themselves to give love, to waste themselves. Do not suppress in yourselves or others the abundant gift, the self-surrender. Do not greedily preserve your time and your strength only for what is useful and reasonable. Keep yourselves open for the creative moment which may appear in the midst of what seemed to be waste. Do not suppress in yourselves the impulse to do what the woman at Bethany did.

In the giving of gifts, it is often good to be wonderfully irrelevant. The song, the 12 days of Christmas, expresses the idea very well of giving irrelevant gifts. You know how it goes --

On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree. Then the song goes on with a list of the most irrelevant and inappropriate and ludicrous gifts we can imagine — two turtle doves, three French hens, six geese laying, seven swans singing, eight maids milking, ending with 12 drummers drumming.

Yet the song, like _this ·story from the Bible, expresses a profound philosophy of giving. It celebrates the high wisdom of wonderfully irrelevant gifts like the woman pouring· out the ointment on Jesus. That's what makes it something to sing about. Would they have sung about a floor mop, or a vacuum cleaner, or a mix-master, or a garbage disposal?

It caused Halford Luccock to say — "Give your true love an inappropriate and impractical gift. Don't get grandma another lace cap or a pair of woolen mittens. She has plenty already and besides she hates the things. Get her a bottle of Chanel No.5, or a set of lipsticks, or a pair of dancing slippers. That will boost her morale, make her feel she is still alive. And for father, lay off the neckties and the conservative scarf. Get him an electric train for age nine. And for your

wife, well that has me stumped as usual, how about a partridge in a pear tree? At least it would be a surprise.

Some of the best gifts of love are those which show a lovely lack of common sense, those which are wonderfully irrelevant.

The important thing is when you feel an impulse to do a beautiful thing for someone, do it! Don't always wait and be practical. I've seen the over-zealous desire to be practical stop too many people from doing something beautiful for someone else. Then one day the person for whom they had always wanted to do something beautiful, dies, and they are only left with their good intentions.

In music, there is a thing called a cadenza. One dictionary defines a cadenza as "that portion of a concerto where the soloist is permitted to build some fanciful improvisations upon the straight musical facts which confront him."

There have been many tricky and beautiful cadenzas by violinists like Kreisler and a hundred others; graceful melodious. little dances on the strings, but not to be found on the notes on the score sheet.

What many of our lives need are more cadenzas. In fact, I do not know how we could live without cadenzas especially when the fact we are confronted with are often pretty stark.

The cadenza is the refuge of childhood against a world of dull facts. Children do not often tell lies, they make cadenzas, improvisations on the facts which confront them. On the street they see a bus and a dog. But what sort of food is that to nourish the emotional life of a growing child? So, they do a little cadenza, a fantasy. They report seeing two grizzly bears, or a deer. With highly gifted children there is even sometimes an elephant. That adds joy and fun to life.

Too many people seem to take as their life's motto, the words of the poker-faced detective in the old Dragnet TV program. "I want the facts, roam, just the facts." So, they live on facts and never bring any music out of life more thrilling than chopsticks.

All of us need more cadenzas in our living, we need more of the wonderfully irrelevant. Like the woman who did a beautiful thing for Jesus, we need to be carried outside of ourselves in such an act of devotion.

So today, take some time in your life to be wonderfully irrelevant. Festivity and fantasy and the irrelevance which is a part of both are not only worthwhile in themselves, but they are also absolutely vital to human life. Amen.