Sunday, August 16, 1981
HOLY WASTE
Matthew 26:6-13

Jesus said of the woman who had poured the costly ointment on his head, “What she has done will be told in memory of her.” What exactly had she done? The answer you give depends on your point of view.

Most of the people who witnessed the event saw only waste. The expensive perfume could’ve been sold, and the money given to the poor. That sounds reasonable enough. Who can blame the disciples for being angry about the apparent misuse in the woman’s action?

Others who were present were not so concerned about the waste of the ointment but couldn’t understand the woman’s foolish act of devotion toward Jesus. It seemed so unnecessary, so impractical and irrelevant. There are always those among us who insist that everything we do be reasonable, sensible, and not extravagant.

But Jesus said, “What she has done will be told in memory of her.” He saw a beautiful, spontaneous outpouring of love on her part which did not count the cost. He saw an individual who was not afraid to give. And Jesus knew how to receive the loving gift. He didn’t say, “Oh you shouldn’t have done that.” or “I don’t deserve it.” or “Why did you waste your gift on me?” Rather he received the gift graciously and said, “You have done a beautiful thing. I will remember it always.”

To those who said the perfume should’ve been sold and the money given to the poor, Jesus replied — “For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” This verse is often half-quoted and without the context to justify not helping the poor at all. People us-ually quote only the first half of the sentence — "You will always have the poor with you,” to justify not doing anything to alleviate poverty. ‘What Jesus was saying was — “I’m going to be killed very soon so let this woman give me this beautiful gift. You can take care of the poor after I’m gone for they will still be here.“

Above all, Jesus was impressed with the abundant, self-giving loving spirit of this woman. He accepted it for what it was. He didn’t analyze her motives. He didn’t ask if the gift was practical or relevant. Jesus knew that love measured out in little drips at a time is not really love. Love is often not practical or reasonable.

Our lives have all been immeasurably improved by men and women who have wasted themselves on behalf of others and were not afraid to do so.

Sometimes we have said of someone who gave her life away for others — "what a waste.” That person could’ve been president of a large company or that person could’ve become wealthy. But was the life of St. Francis a waste? Is the life of Mother Teresa a waste as she gives her love and energy to the very poor and gives some comfort to those who are going to die within a few days and for whom no one else cares? Perhaps it is “holy waste.”

Is the love and tender care we lavish on a person who is dying of a terminal disease wasted?

Was the life of Jesus a waste? Killed as a common criminal at age 33. He spent most of his time with individuals that few others cared for. Is the love in our time given to a gifted child of any more value than the love given to a retarded child?

If you are a parent and love your child as openly and abundantly as possible for years and then that child grows up and turns out bad and ends up rejecting your love — has that love been wasted? Or is it kind of a “holy waste.”

It’s the message of the Christian gospel that God’s love is poured out abundantly on all people everywhere. We do not have to earn that love in any way. God does not discriminate in making that love available. Is that wasteful? Love by its nature is “holy waste” because it is given openly and freely without any thought of return to the giver.

God never says to us what we sometimes say to our children or to one another, “Don’t you appreciate all that I’ve done for you?”

In God’s economy what we sometimes see as waste is actually “holy waste.” Sometimes we can be too practical, too calculating, too relevant. There’s more to love than just the bottom line of a balance sheet.

We need more impractical, irrelevant kinds of love like that of the woman who anointed Jesus. Haven’t there been times in your life when you’ve thought of or wanted to do a beautiful thing, but then held back. It seemed too impractical, too wasteful. The woman who poured the ointment on Jesus’ head could’ve said, “just a few drops will be enough, after all it’s the thought that counts.”

Many people have within themselves an abundant, over-flowing spirit; but rules, conventions, and a too rigid self-control have repressed it and it has almost died. People are sick not only because they have not received love, but also because they do not allow themselves to give love-- openly, abundantly, lavishly, wastefully! They hold back and one day they have no more love to give. The more love you give, the more love you will have to give.

Do not suppress in yourselves or others the abundant, overflowing spirit, the waste of self-surrender, the love which surpasses all reason and practicality. Do not greedily preserve your time and your strength and your money for that which is useful, practical, reasonable and relevant. Do not suppress in yourselves the impulse to do what the woman at Bethany did. Do not be afraid of “holy waste.”