Sunday, March 3, 1985
EXTRAVAGANCE AND SACRIFICE
MARK 14:3-9

“Is it practical?” “What will it cost?” “Who will benefit?” “Is it relevant?” These are questions we all ask about many things that go on in the church and in our lives. We are practical people _or at least we want people to think we are, 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 this that we want everything we do to have an immediate practical value which can be seen and measured, or a favorite “in word” now is “quantified.”

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I get very tired of trying to be relevant or practical all the time. there are times when I want to do things that are totally and. wonderfully irrelevant, impractical and extravagant, as someone said, “There are occasions when extravagance is called for, when thrift demeans. there is a time for roses, and a time for ironing boards or vacuum cleaners,”

Extravagance is especially appropriate when expressing praise to God. If you take time to weigh your gift to God, then you don’t give enough and don´t love enough. Love never. gives as little as it can get by with. It gives all it has, without counting. the cost and without seeking credit for the gift!

All this is what the story from Mark´s Gospel in the Bible is about that was read earlier. Jesus had come to the house of Simon the leper in Bethany. It was holy week, just a few days before the feast of the Passover and just a few days before the coming betrayal, arrest, trial and Death of Jesus. His enemies were plotting against him, and he was aware of the danger.

While Jesus was in his friend’s home, a woman, perhaps someone who had followed him only at a distance up to this point, or maybe someone he had met before and had been of help, came to him in a gesture of worship and adoration and anointed him with a jar of very expensive ointment. She didn´t use just a few drops. She poured out the whole. Biblical scholars tell us. that in today’s money the expensive perfume would be worth at least $500.00.

her unblocked spontaneous impulse deeply touched Jesus. He liked the unrestrained love which she demonstrated. It was not smothered by caution or prudence. her action was both extravagant and impractical — but. I suppose most acts of love are impractical. She was completely lifted out of herself in an act of incredible devotion and love. it was something Jesus would never. forget and neither did the early church. As Jesus said, “Wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

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

This comment by some of the disciples and others “Why this waste? Why this extravagance?” This leads to deeper questions, such as — "what is waste? Is extravagance in some situations, okay? Is there such a thing as holy waste? What is the relationship between extravagance and sacrifice?“.

First, there are many things impractical and irrelevant but still important in our lives. If everything we did or proposed to do had to pass the test of practicality or relevance or measurable results, our lives. Would it be quite dull, and we would be the poorer for it.

What's practical, relevant or quantifiable about having a party just for the sheer fun of it? What´s practical or relevant about buying a beautiful wedding dress and wearing it only one time? What's practical or relevant about singing hymns or saving prayers? Or having a beautiful church building? Can the results be measured and put on a graph? Can we issue a profit and loss statement on such activities? can we ask, "what's the bottom line?"

What's practical or relevant about going to a concert, or spending time in an art museum, or listening to an opera, or sitting in the park doing nothing but looking at the grass, the trees, the birds and the flowers? or reading a novel just for the "fun of reading it? Or visiting friends because you enjoy them? Or sending someone flowers that after a while will wither and dry up? Or putting up a Christmas tree? or playing bridge? Or taking a trip to see the Grand Canyon? or laughing at a funny story? Or giving your wife, husband, friend, or child a gift that can only be appreciated and not used?

Actually, a lot of what we do in this world is wonderfully irrelevant and at times extravagant. Dancing, planting flower gardens, wearing pretty clothes, or going to the ballet. We could just as well wear simple practical clothes with little or no tailoring or decorations — they would also keep our bodies warm and covered. Going to a circus, or to the zoo, or having a picnic in the park, all are extravagant activities when measured by the yardstick of practicality.

Having a nicely furnished home or apartment is wonderfully irrelevant and extravagant. We could live with simple pull-down shades. And why have all that beautiful China and silverware? Plain practical dishes would do.

Most hobbies are extravagant and irrelevant — collecting stamps or collecting anything. And what about sporting events? Sometimes we try to stretch a point and look for all kinds of practical value in them — they teach teamwork, they make money, and they're good exercise as we try to justify the fun we're having. But why not just have fun sometimes instead of looking for all sorts of practical justifications?

Thus, Jesus rebuked the disciples and said, "She has done a beautiful thing to me," not a practical thing, not a relevant thing, but an extravagant and beautiful thing! Jesus knew how to receive an extravagant loving gift. He didn't say, "Oh, you shouldn't have done it," or "I don't deserve it," or "Why did you waste your precious perfume on me?" Rather, he received the gift graciously and said, "You have done a beautiful thing, I will remember it always."

He didn't analyze the motives of the giver. He didn't ask if the gift was relevant or practical.

There is a place in life for this kind of extravagance. I don't know about you, but I get awfully tired of those who are all the time so dreadfully serious, who never seem to laugh, to have fun, to take time off, who never do a foolish or extravagant thing. I get tired of trying to be practical and relevant all the time.

Much of religion is not practical in the usual sense of the word. That's the trouble with the religion of many people. There is never any ecstasy — no hop, skip, or jump, as Luccock put it, only 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.

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 not all the time. He was so serious, so relevant that he couldn't understand at times what Jesus was doing — spending time with children, going to weddings, eating with sinners and outcasts, forgiving people their sins.

Jesus was called by his enemies a glutton and a wine-bibber. But 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 perfume, and he didn't rebuke the woman, but rebuked those who were critical of her.

What we need in our kind of world is more of the spirit of Jesus and that woman. Incidentally, most of the people that Jesus encountered along the way wanted him to do something for them. This unnamed woman is one of the few who came to him and did something for him — something extravagant and surprising.

Maybe what we need more than anything else is, from time to time, to do something extravagant for someone else.

There's one phrase in this story which is often misquoted and used out of context. Remember the critics of the woman's actions said, "Why this waste? This ointment might have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor!" And Jesus replied, "Let her alone, why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me, for you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me."

Usually, this reply is only half quoted. People take the phrase, "You will always have the poor," and stop there, and then use it to tell us that Jesus was saying there will always be poverty and there's nothing that can be done about it. That's not at all what Jesus meant. He was saying, "I'm going to be put to death in a few days, 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 there." It's a matter of timing. Furthermore, he was implying that problems of poverty are not solved by giving a little money here and there.

Then Jesus added one additional comment. He said, "She has done what she could."

Maybe at first hearing that doesn't sound too exciting. However, doing what we can is frequently the last thing we care to do. How much more dramatic and spectacular to daydream and think of the things we could do if only we had the opportunity and the money. People say, "If only I had $100,000 to give away — think of what I could accomplish." And this becomes a substitute for doing what one can do, and so in the end, nothing is done.

Thus, the critics said, "This perfume 'might have' been sold and the proceeds given to the poor." Do you think if they owned the perfume that's what they would've done with it? Most of us have all sorts of ideas of what other people should or could do with what they have. But Jesus said, "She has done what she could." Do what you can do first, and then if you want to dream about what might have been done, it's okay.

“She has done what she could.” Jesus is also saying here that when you have the impulse to do a beautiful thing for someone — do it! Don’t always wait to 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, or moves away, and they are only left with their good intentions.

Some of the best gifts of love are those which show a lovely lack of common sense, those which are extravagant because they are surprising and unusual, and then what is extravagant is also a sacrifice on the part of the one doing the giving.

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. Too often, we think of sacrifice as something painful — but those who joyfully give themselves away in love find the sacrifice a happy and fulfilling experience. They give out of the fullness of themselves, as did the woman in this story. In fact, God’s love and care for us is an extravagant sacrifice.

Many people are sick today, not only because they have not received love, but also because they have not allowed themselves to give love, to be extravagant in their loving and giving. They have within themselves, and it comes from God, an abundant overflowing spirit, but rules, conventions, and stinginess have repressed it and it has almost died. 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.

So this story of the woman coming to Jesus says to us: Do not suppress in yourselves or others the abundant, overflowing spirit, the holy waste of self-surrender, the love which surpasses all reason and practicality. Do not greedily preserve your time and your strength only for what seems relevant and practical. Keep yourselves open for the creative moment where you can give extravagantly and joyfully. Then you are giving as God gives. Amen