Sunday, April 5, 1992
HOLY WASTE
John 12:1-8

One of the most beautiful stories in the New Testament is found in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It's the story of Jesus being anointed with expensive perfume by a woman. According to the stories in Matthew and Mark, the anointing takes place in the home of Simon the leper, and the name of the woman who does it is not mentioned.

Luke describes the incident as occurring in the home of a Pharisee and makes a point of telling us that the unnamed woman who pours the expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and then wipes his feet with her hair is a sinner. In the gospel of John, we are told that it happens in the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, in Bethany, and it is Mary who anoints the feet of Jesus with her most expensive perfume.

Although the details and settings of the stories vary, the main point is the same in all versions. A woman — and let's use the story in John's gospel and call her Mary — in a gesture of worship, love, and adoration, takes her most expensive perfume, her Chanel No. 5, and uses the whole bottle by pouring it on Jesus' feet and then wipes his feet with her hair. It's a story of devotion, holy waste, and wonderful irrelevance, and Jesus accepted and loved it. He saw an individual who was not afraid to give all that she had. Furthermore, Jesus knew how to receive the loving gift. He didn't say, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that, I don't deserve it." He accepted the gift graciously and praised her action.

Her spirit and act of overflowing generosity deeply moved him. He especially liked the spontaneity of the gift. It was not smothered by caution and prudence. She did not pour out a few drops and think to herself, "This is expensive perfume, so I want to be careful and not waste any." No, she used up the whole bottle.

But it wasn't a very practical or relevant thing to do. And some of those present said that. According to the story in the Gospel of John, it was Judas who protested the most, although I think he was the only one bold enough to say what many others there were thinking. He said, "Why was this perfume not sold and the proceeds given to the poor?"

To this, Jesus replied, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Before we go on to uncover the deeper meaning of this story, I need to make a few comments about this last part of Jesus' reply, "You always have the poor with you." This is often the most misquoted and misused text in the New Testament. Time and time again, I have heard people say, "There's nothing that can be done about poor people and poverty in general. Didn't Jesus say, 'There will always be poor people and poverty'?"

Jesus was not declaring the eternity or inevitability of poverty or giving us an excuse for doing nothing about it. The relief of human need looms very large in the ministry of Jesus. According to his teaching, those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick and in prison are doing the works of God and are blessed by God.

Here he was speaking of the immediate situation. He knew that in a few days or weeks, he would be killed. He was saying, "You are to continue as I have done to work with the poor after

I'm gone. They will still be here. But right now, Mary has done a beautiful thing for me, and I'm grateful for it, and you can all learn something from it."

I said earlier that this is a story of what I like to call "holy waste." It's also a story of a woman doing something wonderfully irrelevant.

I don't know about you, but I get a little tired of trying to be "relevant" all the time. Sometimes I want to do things that are totally and wonderfully irrelevant and completely impractical. Not everything we do in this life needs to be connected to a specific priority, goal, or objective that can be put into writing on newsprint and taped to a wall.

Yet there are those among us — and I find this tendency frequently in myself — who are like Judas and the others in this story, and if we had been there, we might have been quick to criticize Mary in her spontaneous act of devotion because it didn't pass the test of immediate relevance and practicality. Perhaps we would have also considered it wasteful and foolish.

And earlier in Jesus' ministry, maybe we would have also agreed with the disciples when they wanted to keep the little children from Jesus. They thought that was a waste of energy. Why should he spend his precious time talking and playing with children who wouldn't understand what his ministry was about anyway when there were so many important and relevant things that needed to be done?

I meet people all the time who are critical of the church because they see much of what the church does as being irrelevant. According to them, taking time to sing hymns, say prayers, and worship God doesn't have much practical value. Yet this story of Mary and her pouring out the whole bottle of perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus reminds us that there is also a need in our religious faith and in the rest of our lives for being wonderfully irrelevant and not being afraid of holy waste.

Much of what is beautiful and inspiring in this world can be considered wonderfully irrelevant. Church buildings like this one and beautiful cathedrals, symphony orchestras, ballets, poetry, and many other forms of art and celebration are not created totally for their immediate practical value. They do not directly feed the hungry or clothe the naked. Yet they nourish the human spirit in other ways that are equally important.

Actually, much of what we do in this world is wonderfully irrelevant and can be considered holy waste in the same way as Mary pouring out her expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus, and our lives are the richer for it.

Think of it: a rose garden has no practical value — it is wonderfully irrelevant. Or why do we spend time planting flowers around our homes and in our parks? They don't feed the hungry or clothe the naked. They are wonderfully irrelevant. Dancing for the sheer joy of dancing has no practical value. Pretty clothes, ribbons, and bows, a new spring hat, a colorful necktie — all are wonderfully irrelevant. We could just as well wear practical clothes with no color or decoration or tailoring. They would keep our bodies covered.

Going to a circus or to the zoo, or flying a kite, or going to a party — all are wonderfully irrelevant activities.

A nicely furnished apartment or house can also be wonderfully irrelevant. Why spend all that money on attractive furniture and matching drapes? Plain pull-down shades would do. And

why have all that beautiful china and silverware? Plain practical dishes are all we need. Why have dinner parties where we sit down together and laugh and eat and enjoy ourselves and play games? Along with Jesus, we can count these things as being wonderfully irrelevant.

Candles and flowers are as wonderfully irrelevant as the songs of birds. Hymns and chants are as non-utilitarian as a lover's kiss; prayers and litanies are only words, cheap as children's smiles. Would you want to live in a world where every item or action had to pass the test of utility and practicality, or had a monetary value placed on it?

There is also the beauty and irrelevance of the unsolicited and impractical gift, the surprise that springs from the imagination of love. Halford Luccock once wrote, "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 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 and 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."

What this story of Mary pouring out her expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus illustrates more than anything else is that love that is true love for another is not measured out in drops — a little here and a little there — but is poured out freely and abundantly, and we do not worry whether or not it might be wasted on another person or whether or not it is the practical and utilitarian thing to do.

Too many people reserve themselves, their affection, the possible outgoing to those in deep need of friendship, comfort, and incentive. Some people appear to be waiting for an audience that seems worthy of their self-giving or an occasion important enough to call for it. Life slips by, and the perfume is never poured out.

Others do not hold back completely but always seem to measure out their love and their giving with a medicine dropper, frightened lest they spend a drop more than the legalities of the situation demand. They don't want to be too generous in their giving. It might get out of control. And some are always comparing. They want to be giving as much as others, but not any more.

These are the people who seem to live their lives on the basis of the principle of scarcity — the assumption that there is not enough. They are tight with their love and their patience. Some are even stingy with their forgiveness, afraid that there is not enough to go around.

One day the disciples asked Jesus how many times they were required to forgive someone who had hurt or offended them. They thought they were being generous, operating from the principle of abundance when they suggested being forgiving as many as seven times. They fully expected Jesus to congratulate them for their generosity. But Jesus said the disciples were actually operating from the principle of scarcity because their question was, "How many times do I have to? What am I required to do? What's the minimum?"

Fortunately, there are others, like Mary in this story, who live their lives on the basis of the principle of abundance. They are open and giving with their love, their patience, and their forgiveness. They are never stingy when it comes to giving to and for others. They know that there is more than enough love and forgiveness in each one of us because God is in charge of the supply, and God's love and forgiveness never run out. It is poured out freely and abundantly to all who would receive it. Therefore, you can never run out as long as you are giving love. The more you give, the more you will receive. You do not need to portion it out —

a little here and a little there, give to this one, withhold from that one. Your account of love does not decrease when you take some out. Rather, it grows; it compounds every time you make a withdrawal.

Today, tomorrow, and each day after, take some time in your life for doing the wonderfully irrelevant, for holy waste. And when you feel an impulse to do a beautiful thing for someone, do it. Amen.