Sunday, April 2, 1995
BEAUTIFULLY IRRELEVANT
John 12:1-8

One of the more popular words for many individuals, groups, and institutions is the word "relevant." Most of us are practical people; we do not like to waste time or material. We do not like the thought of our work or activity being called irrelevant. Especially in the church and in religious circles, the idea of being relevant is preferred. We want the church to carry out programs that meet the everyday needs of people. And that's okay as long as we realize that's not all there is to life as God would have us live it.

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 beautifully irrelevant and completely impractical. Not everything we do in life needs to be connected to a specific goal, priority, or objective that can be written down and measured. There are some things that cannot be judged as being either a success or a failure. There are times when it's okay to be beautifully irrelevant.

There's a revealing story in the New Testament that underscores this point. Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem for what would be the last week of his life. He stopped in the small town of Bethany, where he was the honored guest at a dinner party given by two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother Lazarus. His twelve disciples were also present.

At some point in the evening — the story doesn't disclose if it was before dinner or after — Mary, in a gesture of worship, love, and adoration, took her most expensive perfume, her Chanel No. 5, and used the whole bottle by pouring it on Jesus' feet. Then she wiped his feet with her hair. It was an act of devotion, holy waste, and beautiful irrelevance, and Jesus accepted it and loved it. Mary was an individual who was not afraid to give all that she had. Jesus knew how to receive this loving gift.

He didn't say, "Oh, you shouldn't have done it. I don't deserve it." He accepted the gift graciously and praised her for 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 sprinkle a few drops on his feet and think to herself, "This is expensive perfume, so I want to be careful and not waste any." She used the whole bottle.

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

And 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 examine 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 possibly 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 our world. Didn't

Jesus say, ‘There will always be poor people and poverty, so why worry about it or try to do anything to make it better?’”

Jesus was not here declaring the eternity or inevitability of poverty or in any way 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.

In this incident, 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 to follow my example and work with the poor after I am 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 “doing something beautifully irrelevant.” As followers of Jesus, we can celebrate that. Yet there are those among us — and I find this tendency frequently in myself — who are like Judas and the others in this story. If we had been there, we might’ve also been quick to criticize Mary’s spontaneous act of devotion because it didn’t pass the test of immediate relevance and practicality.

Perhaps we would’ve also considered it wasteful and foolish. Earlier in Jesus’ ministry, maybe we would’ve also agreed with the disciples when they attempted to keep the little children from Jesus. They thought that to be 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, especially 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 of praise to God, 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 a need and a time in our Christian faith and in the rest of our lives for doing things that are beautifully irrelevant.

Much of what is inspiring and nourishes our spirits in this world are things that are beautifully irrelevant. Church buildings like this one, beautiful cathedrals, magnificent pipe organs, concert halls, symphony orchestras, ballets, poetry, and many other expressions of art and celebration are not created and participated in for their immediate practical value. They do not make a profit or directly feed the hungry or clothe the naked. Yet they feed the human spirit in other ways that are equally important.

Actually, much of what we do in this world is beautifully 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 beautifully irrelevant. Or why do we spend time planting flowers around our homes and in our parks? Why does God plant the wildflowers that decorate the earth? They don’t feed the hungry or clothe the naked. They are beautifully irrelevant.

Listening to a great piece of music, dancing for the sheer joy of dancing, going to a ballet, wearing pretty clothes, ribbons and bows, a new spring hat, a colorful necktie — all are

beautifully irrelevant. We could just as well wear simply practical clothes all the time with no color, decoration, or tailoring. They would keep our bodies covered.

Going to a circus or to the zoo, or flying a kite, or giving a party, or sending someone flowers or a birthday card, or giving balloons, or planning a parade, or watching a parade — all are beautifully irrelevant.

A nicely furnished apartment or house is also beautifully irrelevant. Why spend all that money on attractive furniture and matching drapes? Plain pull-down shades would do. Why have all that beautiful china and table service? Plain practical dishes are all that we need. Why spend time cooking and making food look attractive and tasty? 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 beautifully irrelevant.

Candles and flowers are as beautifully 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?

The story of Jesus, Mary, and the expensive perfume describes the beauty and irrelevance of the unsolicited and impractical gift. 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."

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. We do not worry whether it might be wasted on another person or whether it is the practical and utilitarian thing to do.

Too many people reserve themselves, their affection, and 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 but remains on the shelf unused.

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 there are those who are always comparing. They want to be giving as much as others, but not any more.

Too many people tend to live their lives on the basis of the principle of scarcity — the assumption that there is not enough. They are stingy 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 told the disciples they

were 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 limit?”

Fortunately, there are others among us, like Mary in this story, who live their lives on 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. We are only the conduits. It is poured out freely and abundantly to all who would give it and receive it. Therefore, you can never run out when 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 and give it away. Rather it grows. It compounds every time you make a withdrawal and give it away.

Today, tomorrow, and each day after, take some time in your life for doing things that are beautifully irrelevant. God will bless you in it. Amen.