Sunday, March 29, 1998
MARVELOUSLY IMPRACTICAL
John 12:1-8

One of the most unusual 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 accounts in Matthew and Mark, the anointing takes place in the home of Simon the leper, and the name of the woman is not mentioned. In those two Gospels, the woman anoints the head of Jesus rather than his feet.

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 it happens in the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, in Bethany, and that it is Mary who anoints Jesus' feet with her most expensive perfume.

Although the details and settings of the stories vary — and some biblical scholars think these may be separate incidents — there are themes common to all versions. A woman, and in the case of John's Gospel we 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 to pour it on Jesus' feet, wiping his feet with her hair.

This is a story of spontaneous devotion. It is also an act that is marvelously impractical and, on the surface, outlandishly wasteful, yet Jesus accepts it and loves it. He sees an individual who is not afraid to give all she has. Jesus knows how to receive a loving gift. He doesn't say, "You shouldn't have done that. I don't deserve it. It's too extravagant, or don't waste your expensive perfume on me." Instead, he accepts the gift graciously and praises her action.

Her generous spirit deeply moves him. He especially appreciates the lavishness and spontaneity of the gift. It wasn't smothered by caution or prudence. She didn't pour out a few drops and think to herself, "This is my most expensive perfume, so I want to be careful and not waste any." No, she used the entire bottle.

But it wasn't a very practical thing to do. Some of those present remarked on that. According to the story, it was Judas who protested the most — though I think he was the only one bold enough to say what others were probably thinking. He said, "Why was this perfume not sold, and the proceeds given to the poor?" To this criticism, 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 further into the meaning of this story, we need to address Jesus' statement, "You always have the poor with you," because it is one of the most misquoted and misused texts in the Bible. Time and again, I've heard people say, "There's nothing that can be done about poor people and poverty in general. It's a waste of time. Didn't Jesus say, 'There will always be poor people and poverty'?"

We forget the context of Jesus' statement. He was not declaring the eternity or inevitability of poverty or giving us an excuse to do nothing about it. Alleviating human need looms large in the ministry of Jesus. According to his teaching, those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked,

and visit the sick and imprisoned are doing the work of God and are blessed by God. Whether we are successful or not, we are still called to do it.

In this story, when Jesus said, “You will always have the poor with you,” he was referring to the immediate situation. He knew that in a few days he would be killed. He was saying, “I hope you will 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. You can all learn something from her act about giving.”

In other words, it’s not an either/or situation — either sell the perfume and give the money to the poor or do something impractical as an act of love and devotion. It’s both/and. It’s okay to give someone you love a beautiful gift at the appropriate time, and the appropriate time is now, while the person is still alive, rather than waiting until it’s too late.

A man who had been married to a loving wife for 37 years came home one day to find that his wife had suffered a massive stroke. She was rushed to the hospital, but despite the best medical care, she died a few hours later. After the funeral, the husband, still in shock and grief, told his best friend, “Do you know what the worst thing is about her death? I loved her more than anyone in this world, and I never told her. I always told myself that one day I would let her know how much I loved her, but I kept putting it off.”

I told this same story years ago in a sermon on Christmas Eve and suggested that we not put off giving such beautiful gifts. A few days later, I received one of the most touching letters I’ve ever received from one of our television viewers. It was dated December 25, and she wrote, “I want you to know that your sermon yesterday motivated my husband, who is not well, to give me the nicest Christmas gift he has given me in nearly 46 years of marriage. He said, ‘After hearing Dr. Young’s sermon, and since it is Christmas and all, I want you to know that it has been hard for me to say — but I have always loved you.’”

I telephoned the woman who wrote the letter a few weeks later and asked for her permission to quote it in a sermon. She said I could, and then went on to tell me that her husband had died a few days before my phone call, and thus his beautiful gift meant even more to her.

The first point of this story: If you’re going to do a beautiful thing for someone, don’t put it off. Do it now.

The second point: Some of the most beautiful gifts and experiences in this world are marvelously impractical, and God is all for them.

I don’t know about you, but I get a little weary of trying to be practical all the time. Sometimes I want to do things and have experiences that are marvelously impractical. Not everything we do in life needs to be connected to a specific priority, goal, or objective that is measurable or can be put in 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. Had we been there, we might have been quick to criticize Mary’s spontaneous act of devotion because it didn’t pass the test of being practical.

And earlier in the ministry of Jesus, we might also have agreed with the disciples when they wanted to keep the little children away from him. They thought spending time with children was a waste of time and energy. Why should he spend his precious time with children — who

wouldn't understand his ministry anyway — when there were so many important and practical 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 impractical. According to them, taking time to sing hymns, say prayers, and worship God doesn't have much practical value. There's no bottom-line test to apply. Yet the story of Mary pouring out the whole bottle of perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus tells us there is also a need in our religious faith — and in life — for being marvelously impractical.

In fact, much of what is beautiful and inspiring in God's creation and in our lives can be considered marvelously impractical. Church buildings like this one, beautiful cathedrals, symphony orchestras, ballets, poetry, and other expressions of art and celebration do not have practical value. They cannot be evaluated by a bottom line. They don't directly feed the hungry or clothe the naked, but they nourish the human spirit in important ways.

Much of what we do in this world is marvelously impractical. It has been so since the beginning of the human race when crude pictures were drawn on the walls of caves. Because we are created in the image of God, we human beings have the desire to create and be nourished by beauty, and it has nothing to do with practicality.

Think about it: A rose garden has no practical value. Why do we plant flowers around our homes or in parks? They don't feed the hungry or clothe the naked. Parks in cities and the countryside have no practical value. They are marvelously impractical. Dancing for the sheer joy of dancing, pretty clothes, ribbons and bows, a new spring hat, a colorful necktie — all are wonderfully impractical. We could just wear simple, practical clothes with no color or decoration or tailoring. They would keep our bodies covered and warm.

Going to a circus or a zoo, flying a kite, having a nice dinner party with candlelight — these are all marvelously impractical. A beautifully furnished home or apartment has no practical value. Why spend money on attractive furniture and matching drapes? Plain pull-down shades would do. Why have expensive silverware and china? Plain, practical dishes would suffice.

Flowers and candles are magnificently impractical, as are 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 or practicality, or have a monetary value placed on it?

All of us need some things in our lives that are marvelously impractical, some experiences that cannot be measured by a bottom line.

What this story of Mary pouring out her expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus also tells us is that love for another is not to be measured out in drops, a little here and a little there, but poured out freely and abundantly. We should not worry about whether it might be wasted or whether it is the practical or utilitarian thing to do.

Too many people hold back their affection, waiting for an audience they deem worthy of their self-giving or for 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 measure out their love and giving with a medicine dropper, afraid to spend a drop more than the legalities of the situation demand.

They are afraid of being too generous, lest their generosity get out of control. And there are those who are always comparing, wanting to give as much as others but not more.

These are people living their lives on the principle of scarcity — the assumption that there is never enough to go around. They are tight with their love and patience, fearing they will run out. Some are even stingy with their forgiveness, afraid there won't be enough left if needed later.

One day the disciples asked Jesus how many times they were required to forgive someone who had hurt or offended them. They assumed they were being generous, operating from the principle of abundance when they suggested forgiving as many as seven times. They expected Jesus to congratulate them on their generosity. But Jesus told them they were operating from the principle of scarcity because their question was, "How many times do I have to forgive?"

Fortunately, there are others, like Mary in this story, who live their lives on the principle of abundance. They are open and giving with their love, patience, and forgiveness. They are not stingy in giving their love. They know that the more they give, the more they will have.

Thank God for the many gifts and experiences in life that are marvelously impractical. Here are some wonderfully impractical things you can do, as gifts to yourself and others:

- Smile more. It makes others wonder what you've been up to.
- Sing more; whistle a happy tune.
- Laugh out loud. Laughter is good music for everyone.
- Treat yourself to your favorite dessert.
- Give a surprise gift to someone for no obvious reason.
- Do something in secret for someone that is unexpected and undeserved.

Amen.