Book 35

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 story in Matthew and Mark, the anointing takes place in the home of Simon the leper and the name of the woman is not mentioned. Also in Matthew and Mark the woman anoints the head of Jesus and not his feet.

Luke describes the incident as occuring 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. And 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 and some Biblical scholars think these are separate incidents, there are some themes that are 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 spontaneous devotion. It's also an act that is marvelously impractical and on the

surface outlandishly wasteful yet Jesus accepted it and loved it. He saw an individual who was not afraid to give all that she had. Jesus knew how to receive the loving gift. He didn'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." He accepted the gift graciously and praised her action.

Her generous spirit deeply moved him. He especially appreciated the lavishness and 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 my most expensive perfume so I want to be careful and not waste any." Rather she used up the entire bottle.

But it wasn't a very practical thing to do. And

some of those present said that. According to the story, it was Judas who protested the most although 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?" 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, I need to make a few comments about this last part of Jesus' reply, "You always have the poor with you," because this is one of the most misquoted and misused texts in the Bible. Time and time again I have 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 his statement about the poor. He 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. And whether we are successful or not we are still supposed to do it.

In this story, when he said, "You will always have the poor with you," he was speaking of the immediate situation. He knew that in a few days or

weeks he would be killed. He was saying, "I hope you are going 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. You can all learn something from her act about giving."

In other words, it's not a question of either/or, either sell the perfume and give the money to the poor, or doing something that seems 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 instead of waiting until it's too late.

A man who was married to a very loving wife for 37 years came home from work one day to find

that his wife had suffered a massive stroke. She was rushed to the hospital but in spite of the best medical care, she died a few hours later. After the funeral, the husband 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 that 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 ever received from one of our television viewers. It was dated December 25. 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 her permission to quote the letter in a sermon. She said I could use it 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 are 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 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've been quick to criticize Mary in her spontaneous act of devotion because it didn't pass the test of being practical.

And earlier in the ministry of Jesus maybe we would've also agreed with the disciples when they wanted to keep the little children from Jesus. They thought that spending time with children was a waste of time and energy. Why should he spend his precious time with children who would-n't understand what his ministry was about any-way 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 sings hymns, say prayers, and worship God doesn't have much practical value. There's no bottom line test that we can apply. Yet the story of Mary and her pouring out the whole bottle of perfume to annoint the feet of

Jesus tells us that there is also a need in our religious faith and in the rest of our lives 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 such as this one, beautiful cathedrals, symphony orchestras, ballets, poetry, and many other expressions of art and celebration do not have practical value. They cannot be evaluated according to their bottom line. They do not directly feed the hungry or clothe the naked, yet they nourish the human spirit in ways that are important.

In many ways our new pipe organ is marvelously impractical. How can we measure it's artistic

impact on the lives of people who see and hear it?

Much of what we do in this world is marvelously impractical and 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 of it! A rose garden has no practical value. 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. Parks in the middle of cities and on the edge and in the country have no practical value. They are marvelously impractical. Dancing for the sheer joy of danc-

ing, pretty clothes, ribbons and bows, a new spring hat, a colorful necktie, all are wonderfully impractical. We could just as well wear simple practical clothes with no color or decoration or tailoring. They would keep our bodies covered and warm.

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

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 and practicality or had a monetary value placed on it?

All of us need in our lives some things which are marvelously impractical, some experiences which 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 is poured out freely and abundantly and we do not worry about whether or not it might be wasted on an-

other 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 seem 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 want 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 are afraid of being too generous lest their generosity get out of control. There are also those who are always comparing.

They want to be giving as much as others but not more.

These are people who are 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 their patience for fear they will run out. Some are even stingy with their forgiveness, afraid that there will not be enough 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 very generous, operating from the principle of abundance when they suggested forgiving as many as seven times. They expected Jesus to congratulate them on their generosi-

ty. But Jesus suggested to them that 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 minimum?"

Fortunately there are others, such as 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 the giving of their love. They know that the more they give, the more they will have.

Thank God for those many gifts and experiences in life which are marvelously impractical. Here are some suggestions for some wonderfully impractical things you can do. It's a way of giving gifts to others and to yourself.

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 for someone in secret that is unexpected and undeserved. Amen.