Sunday, April 1, 2001
HOLY IRRELEVANCE
John 12:1-8

A popular word in our busy world is “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 other activities being defined as irrelevant. Especially in the church and in religious circles, the idea of being relevant is preferred. We want the church to plan and execute programs that meet the everyday needs of people.

I don’t know about you, but I get tired of trying to be relevant all the time. Sometimes I want to do things that are totally and beautifully irrelevant — things that are completely impractical and even extravagant. I want to participate in activities filled with festivity and even fantasy. I’m convinced that not everything in life needs to be connected to a specific goal, priority, or objective that can be measured and recorded. There are some things that cannot be easily judged as being either a success or a failure. There are times in life to let go and do something in the spirit of holy irrelevance.

There’s a revealing story in the New Testament of the Bible that underscores this point. Here’s the context: Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem for what would turn out to 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 and their brother — Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. His disciples were with him.

At some point in the evening, and the story doesn’t tell us whether it was before or after dinner, 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, extravagance, and holy irrelevance. Jesus accepted the gift graciously, and he loved it. Mary was someone who was not afraid to give all that she had, and Jesus knew how to receive this gift of love.

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 wasn’t smothered with caution and prudence. She didn’t 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 so. According to the story in John’s Gospel, it was Judas who protested the most. Maybe he was the only one bold enough to say what many others were thinking but afraid to say out loud. He said, “Why was this perfume not sold and the proceeds given to the poor?”

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 and how it applies to our lives here and now, 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've 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 declaring the eternity or inevitability of poverty or giving us an excuse to do nothing about it. The relief of human needs looms large in the ministry of Jesus. He spent most of his time with poor people. He was, in many ways, a poor man himself. Never once did he host a dinner party — he couldn't afford it.

According to his teachings, those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick or in prison are doing the works of God and are blessed by God. "As you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

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'm gone. They will still be among you. But right now, Mary has done a beautiful thing for me, and I'm grateful for it. You can all learn something from her action." It's not a question of "either/or" but of "both/and." Because Mary has used this beautiful perfume on me does not excuse you from continuing to work with the poor.

What Mary did for Jesus is what I like to call "an act of holy irrelevance." It was holy because it was an act of love and devotion. It was irrelevant because it wasn't practical, and it wasn't logical. As followers of Jesus, we can celebrate that. Yet there are those among us — and I find this tendency frequently in myself — who, like Judas and the others in this story, might have also been quick to criticize Mary's spontaneous act of devotion because it didn't pass the test of relevance and practicality.

Perhaps we would have also considered it wasteful and foolish. And earlier in Jesus' ministry, maybe we would have agreed with the disciples when they tried to keep the little children from Jesus. They thought it was a waste of time and energy. Why should he spend 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 irrelevant. According to them, singing hymns of praise, saying prayers, and worshiping God don't have much practical value. Yet this story of Mary 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 have a holy irrelevance.

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

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

A friend of mine has, for years, delivered a single beautiful fresh red rose to his wife's office every Tuesday morning. What a wonderful act of holy irrelevance!

Here's my partial list of additional activities and events that can be defined as having a holy irrelevance: a rose garden has no practical value; it is beautifully irrelevant. Why do you spend time planting flowers around your home or in the parks? Why does God plant the wildflowers that decorate the earth? They don't feed the hungry or clothe the naked. They are wonderfully irrelevant.

Attending a symphony concert or listening to an inspiring piece of music at home, dancing for the sheer joy of dancing, going to a ballet, wearing pretty clothes, ribbons, and bows, a new spring hat, a colorful necktie, or sitting down to a beautifully prepared and served meal with your best china and tableware — all of these have a holy irrelevance. We could wear plain, simple clothes with no style or decoration or tailoring — they would keep our bodies covered. A beautifully decorated tree at Christmas time has a holy irrelevance, as do many of the gifts we give and receive.

Add to your list: going to a circus or to the zoo, flying a kite, giving a party, watching the birds in your backyard, sending someone flowers or a birthday card, giving balloons, or watching or participating in a parade — all possess a holy irrelevance.

A nicely furnished apartment or home is also beautifully irrelevant. Why spend all that money on attractive furniture and matching drapes? Straight utilitarian chairs would work. Plain pull-down shades would do.

For those of us who live in Nebraska and even for many who do not, Cornhusker football is holy and also irrelevant. What is practical or logical about grown men running up and down the field, trying to get an odd-shaped ball across a goal line or between two goalposts, while 76,000 fans are yelling their lungs out? Most games and sports can be classified as wonderfully irrelevant. In fact, if we try to make them too relevant, we destroy the fun.

Candles and flowers are as beautifully irrelevant as the songs of birds. Songs 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 or gathering had to pass the test of utility or practicality, or had a monetary value placed on it? This story of Jesus and Mary and the expensive perfume describes the beauty and holy irrelevance of the unsolicited and impractical gift.

It is holy because this story of Mary pouring out her expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus illustrates more than anything else that the love of God — and our love for each other — cannot be measured out in drops, a little here and a little there. True love 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, and their potential for reaching out to those deep in need of friendship, comfort, and encouragement. Some people appear to be waiting for an audience they think worthy of their self-giving or an occasion important enough to call for it. Life slips by, and the perfume is never poured out — it 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 situation calls for. They don't want to be too generous in their giving — it might get out of control. And there are others who are always comparing. They want to be as giving as others, but not any more.

The life of love is not to be lived on the basis of scarcity — the assumption that there is only so much available, so we have to be careful and not love too much or we'll run out. People become stingy with their love and their patience. Some are even stingy with 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 forgiving as many as seven times. They fully expected Jesus to congratulate them for their generosity. But he told them 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?"

You will remember, he told them there is no limited supply of such things as forgiveness, love, and patience. Fortunately, there are those among us who, like Mary in this story, live their lives on the principle of abundance. They are open and giving with their love, patience, and forgiveness. They are never stingy when it comes to doing something for others. They know there is 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 will give and receive it.

You can never run out when you are giving love. The more you give, the more you will receive. You do not have 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. It grows. It compounds every time you make a withdrawal and give it away.

Here's a suggestion: today, tomorrow, or the next day — and many times during the rest of your life — do what Mary did. Do something that is holy and irrelevant. Amen.