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 activity defined as being 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 which 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 which 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 and there 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 does not tell us if 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 and then she wiped his feet with her hair. It was an act of devotion, extravagance and holy irrelevance. Jesus accepted the gift gracefully and he loved it.

Mary was an individual who was not afraid to give all that she had and Jesus knew how to receive this gift of love.

He didn't say, "O 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

with 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 that.

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 mis-used 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 needs looms very 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 and 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 brother 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 and 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. I believe that 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 and 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 relevance and practicality.

Perhaps we would've also considered it to be wasteful and foolish. And earlier in Jesus's 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 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 being irrelevant. According to them, singing hymns of praise, saying prayers and worshiping 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 which have a holy irrelevance.

In fact, much of what is inspiring and nourishes our spirits and our bodies in this world are things which 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, 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 personally to his wife's office every Tuesday morning a beautiful single fresh red rose. What a wonderful act of holy irrelevance!

Here's my partial list of some additional activities and events which 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 in or in the parks? Why does God plant the wild flowers which

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; 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, or flying a kite, or giving a party, or watching the birds in your back yard, or sending someone flowers or a birthday card, or 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 goal posts while 76,000 fans are yelling their lungs out? Most games and sports can be classified as being 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 of Mary and the expensive perfume describes the beauty and the 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 of 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, the possible outgoing to those deep in 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. 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 giving as

much 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, were 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 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 to 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, their patience and forgiveness. They are never stingy when it come 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 would give it 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 or 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.