

SERMON for Sunday, March 25, 2007
John 12:1-8

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What a Waste!

Methodist pastor James Howell writes, *I remember my sixth-grade Sunday School teacher, Floyd Busby. Mr. Busby would score a flat zero on teaching technique or age-appropriate planning. He was old and had a whiny voice, and his 'technique' was to open his Bible and read – for an hour. But I remember Mr. Busby's name, and the profound moment when he simply stopped reading. We suspected that he had died. But when we looked up, we realized that he was crying – back in the 60's, when men didn't cry. We were tempted for a nanosecond or two to poke fun at him – but even as 11-year-olds we knew the moment was to be revered. Mr. Busby gathered himself and read further, about how they arrested Jesus, mocked him, beat him, pressed a crown of thorns into his forehead. He stopped again, looked up at us boys with tears streaming down his face and dripping onto his open Bible, and pleaded with us: 'Don't you boys see what they did to my Lord?' I will never forget it. This was my first encounter with someone who was so deeply in love with Christ.**

Mary took a pound of costly perfume and anointed Jesus' feet...and from the casual onlooker to the disciple Judas, it was considered a waste of resources, a waste of money, a waste of something far too fine to pour on feet. But who's to judge? Who can tell Mary that what she did was too fine a gesture? This stop in Bethany was a turning point in the life of Jesus, on the road to Jerusalem. The plot to kill Jesus was already in motion, and death was on the horizon. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead a few days earlier, perhaps in a rehearsal of his own. And Jesus came to the home of these dear friends, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, for dinner. A stop along the way filled with meaning, at least from the perspective of now. The expensive and fragrant perfume might well have been left over from the preparation of Lazarus for the tomb, and Mary's act could have been seen as a way of preparing Jesus for what was to come. At least Jesus could have seen that - despite the dinner party at Bethany celebrating the new life of Lazarus, a dinner party of thanks for the miracle and friendship of Jesus – seen the pall of death hanging in the very air. And he knew that the gift of Mary was not a waste but one of lavish love.

There are many things in this world that are a waste, some of which we could all agree upon, others about which we could have a good debate. The TV program, 20/20, on Friday night had a brief story on the multi-million-dollar mansions and private jet planes on which some TV evangelists have squandered donors' contributions. Is that evangelism? What a waste! Our common value of stewardship would lead us to denounce that which pollutes our air and water, needlessly uses up natural resources. Our common understanding of justice would make us suspicious of public money that was diverted from organizations that helped stabilize families to those which subsidized the leisure activities of those with disposable income, of funds taken from health care to providing luxuries for politicians. Our common affirmation of the treasure of human life makes us sick when we hear of the casualties of war - 3,236 United States troops killed, 24,000 injured, an estimated 655,000 Iraqis dead. What tragic wastes - all of these - of God's precious gifts. But then there are those things which speak to each of us in different ways, and we could squabble for days or even years over whether cathedrals should be built as symbol of the sacred in our common midst, over whether or not certain programs should be eliminated in our public schools, over the expenditure of money for

recreation, arts, anything beyond the bare necessities in our homes, churches, workplaces, schools and communities. What are important for some are less so for others, what some would call essential some would call a waste.

What does this have to do with Mary, with Judas, with Jesus, with us? Judas was the one who tried to remind everyone that the money that the perfume would have brought on the open market could have been spent on the poor. Clever crook that he was, he so neatly diverted attention from himself and his own plotting to what he knew was absolutely vital to Jesus' ministry of servanthood. He tried to point the sinful finger at someone else. Of course, the ruse did not work. Jesus replied with words that would become famous, and often misquoted and misused, *You always have the poor with you*. It wasn't that he was saying that therefore we should not minister to the poor – in fact, his whole ministry was devoted to the outcast and the needy. It was that Jesus could see to the heart of Mary and know that her single-minded purpose was in devotion to him. And really, that is what Jesus calls us all to do, to pour out extravagant, even what might seem wasteful, amounts of grace and love, even as Jesus poured out his very life for us.

This act of Mary's goes against our very grain. I remember so clearly my mother's admonitions to never waste anything, brought up as she was in poverty and then as a young adult during the depths of the depression. Her frugality was legendary in our family, and we would chuckle at the quantities of plastic bags, rubber bands, assorted containers and many partly used spools of thread, ketchup and sugar packets from restaurants, bits of ribbon and wrapping paper and embroidery thread that she insisted we move from her last home in New Jersey to Wisconsin. She had no trouble getting rid of the larger items – car, furniture, and big TV. Those were sold or given to favorite nieces and nephews. It was the throwing away that she could not bring herself to do. And to the end, even through the haze of memory loss, she would tell me when I was about to toss a used paper towel, *No, keep it*. And so innocently and inadvertently we are trained to hoard and to parcel out not only our things, but our passions, our dedication, our devotion. And we translate that not only into the small items of everyday but our expressions of faith. In some basic way, we simply do not understand Mary.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who stood his ground and took his stand and which eventually took his life in a concentration camp, had much to say about the cost of discipleship, the title of one of his books. In another volume, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he explains, *It is not some religious act which make a Christian what he or she is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world... This being caught up into the messianic suffering of God in Jesus Christ takes a variety of forms in the New Testament. It appears in the call to discipleship, in Jesus' table fellowship with sinners... in the healing of the sick, in Jesus' acceptance of children... the religious act is always something partial; faith is always something whole, an act involving the whole life*. Jesus does not call us to a new religion but to a new life. He makes a distinction between a religious act and faith. How often we mistake one for the other, between what is partial participation, and what is a way of life. Our lives are filled with religious acts, of making our pledge, of attending choir practice, of serving a meal, of reading our Bible, going to circle, passing on the prayer chain request, some small and some taking hours of commitment. We should never stop our religious acts. But we must also ask, and answer, the question for ourselves of whether or not faith is our whole way of life.

Mary committed herself to Jesus, deliberately and intentionally. We don't know if she actually planned it out, and I suspect she did not. We don't know if she fully understood the implications of anointing Jesus as if for burial and the nearness of his death, and I suspect she did not. But we do know that Mary did not randomly spill the perfume, she did not do this as a casual gesture, she did not simply shake out a few drops from the jar. She gives her whole self, as preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes, *in an act so lavish that it suggests...there will be nothing prudent or economical about the death of this man, just as there has been nothing prudent or economical about his life. In him the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest.*

Giving your whole self over, as God gave Godself in Christ. We are not used to language like that, not in our faith tradition. We are not used to overt displays of healing and public outcries of praise. We are not used to singing, as in the words of the old hymn, *stand up, stand up for Jesus*, and, in fact, it makes us uncomfortable. We are wary of generosity, our own or other's. We are stingy with our enthusiasms, and hold ourselves in reserve, for perhaps another day. But Mary seized the moment, seized the day to shower her love. And that is the pity for our caution, when the day and the moment for extravagance are before us, and we miss it, saying, *What a waste*. So what are those moments for you, and for us? What calls for your passion and for your action, right now? Is there peace to be prayed for and peace in the world to be stood for? Is there a lonely child down the street or around the corner who desperately needs an adult who will believe in her and stand up for her against neglect and abuse? Is there a struggling young teen who needs the warmth of unconditional friendship? Is there a family teetering on the edge of disaster and joblessness and homelessness? Is there justice for immigrant workers to support and newcomers to this country to befriend? You will not save the world, any more than Mary did that day in Bethany. And it could be that some will see your efforts as a waste of time, especially if there are no dramatic results. But you have followed the heart of God, you have followed Jesus to the cross, you have poured out your love. And that is enough.

Remember the Sunday School teacher I spoke of at the beginning? In the words again of James Howell, *Mr. Busby gathered himself and read further, about how they arrested Jesus, mocked him, beat him, pressed a crown of thorns into his forehead. He stopped again, looked up at us boys with tears streaming down his face and dripping onto his open Bible, and pleaded with us: 'Don't you boys see what they did to my Lord?' I will never forget it. This was my first encounter with someone who was so deeply in love with Christ.** Like Mary, so deeply in love with Christ that she would pour out expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. Like you? Amen.

* *Christian Century*, February 20, 2007, p. 33