

HOLY WASTE

(Scripture lesson: Mark 14:3-9)

A Sermon

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by

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Recently in a conversation with a friend on this campus he told me that his wife one day reprimanded him because, in something of an impulsive moment, he had spent too much money in an effort to enhance her vacation. With a wifely eye on budgets and children to be fed and clothed, she objected that they could ill afford the money. With his native shrewdness, he shifted the argument from the head to the heart and reminded her that when they were married he could ill afford her wedding ring. The money could have been spent for household items and many other necessities. As he went on to press the case, I was led to believe that reflections upon the wedding ring promptly dissolved her protests in a glorious mist of sentimentality. After all, Pascal told us long ago that "the heart has its reasons which the mind knows not of." And even as a bachelor I would plead unshamefully for wedding rings which cannot be afforded and for wives who are sometimes too expensive.

This little human episode brings to the fore a question: Is there a place in life, and certainly in Christian experience, for extravagance, for the unblocked impulse, for the spontaneity of love? In the spiritual dimensions of life Jesus certainly made great place for giving which is not smothered with caution and prudence.

Nowhere is this fact dramatized for us more significantly than in our Scripture of the morning. We read that Jesus has come to the home of Simon the leper at Bethany. The lines of destiny are drawn, and with the ominous shadows of the cross looming ever nearer, our Lord no doubt comes to this moment as one in whom desperate tides of the whole world's anguish force through the channels of a single heart. Suddenly the place is astir as a woman impulsively breaks an alabaster jar and pours the contents on his head. Her extravagant and impulsive action prompted criticism from the shocked onlookers and then moved Jesus to high praise and spirited defense of her deed. Why was this ointment wasted? Here is a clash in that eternal debate between the market mind and the life of the spirit. This is the old conflict between earth-bound reason and the spontaneity of love. To be sure, those who condemned the woman were of the middle class, and their limited means made frugality a necessity. Their prudential souls were shocked. Their failure to see this act of love as anything but waste showed an inability to use any measurements save those of the market place. It might have been sold--the fact scandalized them, for well did they know the solid, substantial world of copper, silver, and gold.

The verdict of these shocked onlookers is not new to life. Here we have the purely reasonable versus the ecstatic element in religion. In the minds of most, such devotion as that manifested by the woman builds no barns, yields no compound interest. It is a foreign entanglement of the soul. For minds which know the cost of everything and the value of nothing, the sacrifice of life for faith is wasteful. Many a well upholstered saing has wasted sympathy upon some young man or woman who, in some far-flung outpost of human need, has forgotten themselves into a glorious happiness. But, in the sophisticated vulgarity of our day, we continue to deplore the fact that they did not enter a vocation where they could "make good." By this measure

Francis of Assissi wasted his life when he could have been lord of the manor instead of an impecunious beggar. Such reasoning would look at John Wesley and say, "Why all this waste?" With marvelous executive skill he could have been a major general or a parliamentary whip. Such logic would question the daring of father Damien who, in working among the lepers of the Hawaiian Islands, contracted that dread disease but then rejoiced that when he preached to the lepers he could say, not 'my brethren' but 'we lepers.'

We observe from the record that Jesus warmly applauded the woman. He was deeply moved. Her devotion was a thing of beauty, and he said that wherever his gospel is preached the deed of the woman would be spoken of as a memorial to her.

Here we come upon a significant truth: Our Lord is strangely impatient with our caution, prudence, timidity, and human calculation. Here He saw the abundant heart and accepted what He saw. There is no attempt to analyze the different elements in it. We look in vain here or elsewhere for any word of caution about the extravagant expenditure of life. It seems that our Lord was for burning the bridges after him to insure no retreat. Bluntly did he say, "Whoever puts his hand to the plow and turns back is not worthy of me." He had his most delightful experiences with people who made brave adventures with their faith and who showed a wreckless disregard of human convention and judgment. That must have been a happy occasion for him when the friends of the sick man, unable to get into the house where Jesus stood because of the press of the throng, demolished the roof and let the bed down into the room. Jesus rejoiced to know that his gospel was doing serious business that day. He was much impressed when the poor widow came by the urn in the temple where people dropped their contributions for the support of institutions. Many made an elaborate ceremony of this. One day there came a widow who put in two mites. This was practically nothing, but it was all she had, and when one gives up all it doesn't have to be much to be everything. The Lord praised her: "These out of their abundance have given something; she out of her poverty has given all." Of course, if we were writing this story and did not know Jesus well we would have a little sequel to this episode. We would have had our Lord call the woman back, recover from the box her poor little coins and hand them back to her, magically transformed into gold. We would have him command her to go and live happily on them for the rest of her days. But at this time he did nothing to relieve her poverty. He let her give all and then commended her for doing it, for well did he know that she already had her reward. You see, Jesus never wanted to get between people and their sacrifices. There is no caution about doing too much or investing life too deeply. He liked to see men take up crosses. One day, after our Lord had discoursed about the perils of riches, Simon Peter, in agitation of mind, asked: Master we have left all and followed you. What do we get? The reply of the Master was to the point: "You will become sons of the Most High." Alas, the great reward of discipleship is not in getting but in becoming; not in having but in being. Thus do we see in the first part of our Scripture, then, the old clash between our market values and the mind of the spirit. But Jesus saw this for what it was, and in sharp retort said to her critics: "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her?" Then there follows his magnificent defense in two brief propositions.

She has done a beautiful thing. Imagine doing a deed which would be called "beautiful" by the Master of men. And the word used is kalos, which occurs something like 100 times in the New Testament. The word suggests that which is attractive, delights the heart, that which is beautiful and honorable in the moral sense. When Antigone, in Sophocles' drama, goes to bury her brother, who has been disgraced in the eyes of the state and is forbidden honorable burial, she is warned that she will suffer for what she does. But her reply is, "Tis good (beautiful) for me to die in such employ."

This word comes eventually to be used in describing the good deeds which are to characterize the Christian. The suggestion is that the Christian's life is to be not only good but attractive. The Scottish minister, J. P. Struthers, was right when he said, "What the Church needs is Christians who will sometimes do a bonnie thing."

So much of our goodness is grim, austere, unlovely, protesting. We today are often wary of extravagance and strangely suspicious of impulsive self-giving. In us the desire to believe is always neatly balanced by the proper proportion of respectable doubt. Impulses to wonder are quickly strangled by cautious skepticism and nervous calculation. Perhaps we do what T. S. Eliot suggests: we measure out our lives by coffee spoons, and when we come to die it is only the last little spoonful dripping away. I believe personally that in many people there has been the abundance of the heart, but this has often been stifled by human laws, conventions, and rigid self-control. And many a person in this world suffers today, not so much because he has not received love, but because he has not allowed himself to give love, to waste himself, as it were. How many times we suppress in ourselves or in others the abundant heart and a waste of self-surrender which trespasses all reason. But how we do need to "keep open the East window of the soul to divine surprise." Never suppress in yourself the impulse to do what the woman at Bethany did, for remember that Jesus will be on your side even when others call you foolish.

Norman Cousins, editor of the Saturday Review, wrote an article about Schweitzer, observing that, to many, he is a sentimental do-gooder wasting his life on African natives who can neither read nor write: But ponder these words: "The greatest tragedy in the world is what dies inside us while we live--the death of faith, hope, love, feeling, awareness, response. Schweitzer has proven to the world that, while we have no control over the fact of our existence, we do hold supreme command over the meaning of that existence for us. And our greatest tragedy is that we shall die and never know our greatest power--the power of love to give itself for others."

Yes, long ago, in Simon's house at Bethany our Lord understood this and called this deed beautiful. He called it that because he saw in it love which refused to count the cost, which set beauty above utility. He saw in this deed love lifted to a fine art. Here he honors the fine excess, the surprise which springs from the imagination of love. There is a place in all devotion for love lifted to an art. There is a place for it in worship--in the beauty of cathedrals which, with soaring lines and arches, are prayers in stone music, the great language of the heart, expresses love in art. Poetry, as the spontaneous overflow of great and powerful feelings, is

the language of the soul. And we know that any great book is what Milton said it was: "The precious life blood of a master spirit, treasured up on purpose for a life beyond life." So we celebrate today in this sermon love that is not smothered by caution and prudence and a heart that is lifted out of arithmetic into love. No wonder Jesus called it beautiful. She has done what she could. To put it another way: she has done what lay in her power. But someone says, "This isn't much of a tribute--she has done what she could." But it is a great tribute, if for no other reason the rather obvious fact that precious few people in this world ever do what they can--what lies in their power. Doing what we can is often unexciting and unspectacular. It is much more romantic and engaging to think of what we cannot do. In a delightful reverie this morning I could sigh and try to imagine what I would do with \$50,000 which I do not have rather than getting down to the dull, prosaic business of deciding what to do with the \$5.00 I do have. It is poetry to try to imagine what I would do had I the gifts and graces of an Einstein or a Schweitzer, but I have to face the prose of deciding what to do with the one talent I do have. For this morning I belong to the common 5/8's--I am a little more than half but not quite 2/3's. So our Lord was not amiss in reading this deed for what it was--the act of one who did what lay in her power. This scene powerfully speaks of the consecration of personality--the unmeasured sharing of the best that we are and have. Personality is a precious perfume, and it is a terrible tragedy to carry it through life in an unbroken jar. Our Lord would say, "Spend it. Break it. Use it. Give all - and you will know the meaning of life." For "the highest use of life is to spend it for that which will outlast it." Jesus said that what the woman did would be told in memory of her. And at the end of our Lord's journey on this earth he did not disavow the sacred waste, for in the self-surrendering love of the cross there is the glorious meeting of reason and ecstasy, of moral obedience and sacred waste.

Hear the words of George Santayana:

"O world, thou chooseth not the better part.
It is not wisdom to be only wise
And on the inward vision close the eyes.
It is but wisdom to believe the heart."