



A Holy Waste

TEXT
John 12:1-8

January 15, 2012 — Sermon by Rev. Jarrett McLaughlin

If I may, I'd like to share a few of my favorite proverbs and wise sayings: "Waste not, want not." "A penny saved is a penny earned." "Thriftiness is next to godliness."

Okay, that's not how that last one goes ... but that doesn't make it any less true.

You don't have to hang around me too long to discover that I am thrifty. My close friends might say cheap, but I prefer thrifty.

I'm the guy who sees two more peanut butter sandwiches in what most would call an empty jar of peanut butter. You just have to be patient.

I'm the guy who tips the shampoo bottle upside down to get out the last drop — and then I fill it with water and shake it to get what's sticking to the sides.

Some of you might be the people who squeeze every last bit of toothpaste out of the tube; if so, I think you're normal. But, I ask you, have you ever cut the tube open and swished your toothbrush in there to get what's left? I have — and not because I didn't have a brand new tube ready to go.

Thriftiness or neurosis? It's hard to say, but I cannot stand wasting.

For better or for worse, this is a part of who I am. This is also the part of me that balks at the story like the one Larry/Scott read today — and the part of me that chafes against that quote on the cover of your bulletin. "What do you mean I don't know the value of anything? I count every red penny of every single thing I buy! I know exactly what it cost, and frankly, Kathleen Norris, I resemble that remark. I mean, I *resent* that remark."

Let me level with you. As a person who wastes nothing, I am convicted by this story and challenged by it — this story that bids us to go overboard, to lose ourselves in extravagance, to literally pour some out for Jesus. I'm also convicted by it because I figure it's never a good sign when you start identifying with Judas, the traitor.

But it's not just me, right? Haven't you ever seen somebody make an extravagant gift and muttered to yourself: "That's just indulgent ... sinful even. I wonder how much good we could do with all that money. What a waste!"

Boosters for a university athletic program; supporters of the arts who buy outrageously expensive paintings and then

donate them to museums: It's easy to look down our noses and criticize those gifts — because they, of course, come with publicly displayed plaques and really great seats to games. It's easy to look at those gifts and see the self-indulgence and say: "What a waste. Just think what we could do with that money."

I could even imagine that such words come easy in a congregation like this. Village Church has a proud and admirable tradition of committing itself to mission, to filling the needs of those less fortunate. And though we might not be thieves, as John wants us to believe about Judas, I bet the sentiments of this cost-counting disciple have been spoken aloud more than once in conversation about our budget and stewardship.

We don't need a fancy new food pantry; we need to feed people. We don't need a fancy organ or sanctuary; what we need to be doing is taking care of people.

And that's true: We do need to take care of people. But this text forever silences any illusion that faithfulness is only about our ability to provide for others — because in the end, even

our mission and our philanthropy can become self-indulgent. It can become too much about us; about how good it makes me feel and how those less-fortunate people are so blessed to have me. It's hard to be generous with absolutely no strings attached to ourselves.

One scholar, reflecting on this scripture, remembers attending a stewardship conference on the theme of generosity. One presenter spoke about offering a gift directly to God, and all the clergy began to yawn. Then he pulled a \$100 bill from his wallet, set it on fire and prayed, "Lord, I offer this gift to you, and to you *alone*."

The reaction was electric. Clergy began to fidget in their chairs, watching that Ben Franklin go up in smoke — like so much perfume. Somebody whispered that it was illegal to burn currency. "Do you not understand?" the pastor exclaimed. "I am offering it to God, and that means it is going to cease to be useful for the rest of us."

"What a waste!" we say, right? By the way, I don't think I have to say this, but please don't ignite your offering today. Such wastefulness is near offensive. And yet, here in scripture, Jesus blesses such wastefulness. "Leave her alone," Jesus says, "... you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Now we need to hear this right. Jesus is not saying, "You always have the poor with you, so it's best to forget about them because they're nothing but a

bunch of parasites who just want to use you for everything you've got." That's how this verse has been interpreted before, but that's not Jesus. That's nothing but propaganda from those who want to shirk their responsibility to their fellow human beings.

Jesus is actually quoting Deuteronomy 15:11 here, and the full quotation is: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"

Let there be no doubt, Jesus cares about the poor. Jesus cares about how those of us who have enough share with those who do not. And I even believe that Jesus wants us to be responsible in how we share, so that we don't waste needlessly. But I also believe that Jesus recognizes a holy waste when he sees one — a gift that has no strings attached. And he sees that selfless gift in Mary's anointing.

So how does she do it? How does Mary make this wasteful gift that is somehow pleasing to Jesus? Because it is a fine line. This story comes right at the turning point of the gospel of John.

Not many days prior, Jesus stood amidst the stench of Lazarus' tomb and called him from death into life. The one who said "I am the way, the truth and the life" proves this is true by giving life back to someone he loved: Lazarus, who happens to be Mary's brother. And now, mere days later, he sits

amidst a room filled with the aroma of Mary's anointing. But what you can miss in this story is that death still hangs heavy in the air. Mary's perfume is just covering it up.

For in John's telling of the story, raising Lazarus from the dead is the final straw that seals Jesus' fate. After he raises Lazarus, and his fame spreads ever wider, the powers that be determine, at this point, that Jesus *must* die. That empty tomb, so recently vacated by Lazarus, is now ready to receive Jesus. He gives life to Lazarus at the cost of his own. That's necessary background information for the story we read today.

But that's not the only giving of life in this story. When Judas criticizes this extravagant gesture, he says that the perfume could have been sold for a particular sum of money: 300 denarii. The Bible never gives details unless they are important; that sum of money is important.

A denarius is basically the wage for one day of labor. Keeping in mind the command to obey the Sabbath, which removes 52 working days from the year, 300 denarii is roughly a year's worth of wages. So in a single gesture of profound love and gratitude, Mary has just poured out a year of her life on the feet of Jesus. Mary's gift is holy precisely because it is a waste of *her* life.

I find that fascinating. When the gift is a waste of her very life, and not just some leftovers, then it becomes a "holy waste."

I've been wondering this week: What would it mean to pour out a year of your life for Jesus Christ — not because it's useful to you or to anybody else; not because it would look good on your resume or make you feel good about yourself, but simply as an act of gratitude, a waste of some part of your life for the one who wasted his entire life for you?

Today (9:30) Colton, Jacob, Kaitlyn, Oliver, Avery, Blake, Parker, Thomas, Delaney, Annabelle and Adele, (11:00) Effy and John, all of these children have been baptized in the name of Christ Jesus. They have their whole lives ahead of them — a stretch of endlessly numbered days. I keep asking myself what it would mean for their parents, along with their new church family, to teach these children, and to model for them, that being a disciple of Christ means that you pour yourself out — even when it seems like a waste.

How would that shape the lives of our families? How would that shape our Children's Ministry or our Youth Ministry? How would that shape how we talk about mission? I don't know what that looks like — but one thing it would communicate is that being a disciple of Christ costs an awful lot. And I think what the church needs to reclaim is that being a disciple is costly.

Preacher Fred Craddock tells a story about leading worship at a university church several years ago. That day he preached about Jesus' calling

his disciples. After worship, a young woman approached him and told him that his sermon had clinched what she had been struggling with for a while. When Craddock asked what that was, she told him she wanted to drop out of medical school.

Craddock responded, "Why would you want to do that?" She said she was going to go work in the Rio Grande Valley, saying, "I believe that's what God wants me to do." So she quit school, went to the Rio Grande Valley and now sleeps under a piece of tin in the back of a pickup truck, teaching little children while their parents are out in the field.

She dropped out of medical school for this, and her folks back in Montana, her professors at school, even Craddock himself, a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, all stand around and say, "What a waste."

There are some who give a lot more, but it looks like one year is enough to please Christ. One year over an entire lifetime doesn't seem like that much actually, but it is. It really is! Do you think you have it in you to "waste" one on Jesus?

It's a challenge — to me, as much as anybody else. I hate wasting. But maybe, like Mary, we might live into that proverb we all know so well: *Wastefulness, holy wastefulness, is right next to godliness.* Amen! So be it!

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.