

HOLY WASTE

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 126
John 12:1-8

Our lesson this morning takes us to the epicenter of John's gospel. It is the day before Jesus will ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and set off a riotous public

resist suggesting romantic implications. Was she really anointing his body for death? Was she overwhelmed with gratitude that her brother was alive and they were together again? Whatever else it was, it was an act of extravagance, a very public act of deep love and devotion.

But not everyone saw it that way. “What a waste. What a foolish waste,” someone says out loud. It’s Judas. He’s the treasurer, holds the purse, accepts contributions, pays the bills, and, John explains, skims a little off the top for himself. Judas’s question, however, is not unreasonable: good trustees in a church like ours would ask the same question. “Why wasn’t the perfume sold and the money given to the poor?” He’s the bookkeeper. The perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii. One denarius is a day’s wage. Three hundred is a year’s income. That’s a lot of money; it could do a lot of good. After all, institutions hire consultants to help them know the highest and best use of assets, to achieve long-term goals. Giving it all away for love, pouring out a valuable asset on someone’s feet, isn’t ordinarily among the recommendations.

Jesus comes to her defense. He says, “She’s been keeping the perfume for my burial, which could happen any day now. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” Opponents of welfare programs to help poor people like to quote Jesus to justify not passing legislation that might actually help poor people. So, it’s worth pausing to observe that he was quoting the law, a phrase everyone knew, from the book of Deuteronomy, which urges generosity to the poor. This is what it says: “Give liberally and be ungrudging. . . . 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.’”¹ So to cite “the poor you always have with you” as a reason not to extend help is a distortion and certainly not what Jesus meant—Jesus who, after all, spent his whole life among mostly poor people and who had a whole lot more to say about poverty and economic justice than he said about any other issue.

It is, however, a reasonable question: Why not use the valuable asset—this expensive perfume—to do some good? Why waste it? The question deserves thoughtful attention. When times are tough, is it appropriate to fill the church with poinsettias at Christmas and lilies on Easter? When the homeless poor are lined up at the door, is it right to fix the pipe organ? The answer is not simple, as Jesus tried to teach Judas. Sometimes, apparently, there is nothing more important than the impulse to act extravagantly and beautifully out of a heart full of love.

John Shelby Spong, the late Episcopal bishop who was in the news a lot for challenging his church’s orthodoxy and traditional morality, wrote an article once for the *Christian Century*, one that I have never forgotten. He was the Bishop of Newark at a time when the city was in dreadful shape. His point was that money spent to beautify urban churches is not wasted—amidst the grittiness and ugliness and despair of inner-city neighborhoods, urban churches are needed to shine as symbols of hope, as signs of the kingdom.

Mary poured out her heart, her deep love and hope. She put herself at great risk by so publically identifying herself with Jesus, and she risked the immediate ridicule and

¹ Deuteronomy 15:10.

disdain of the rational and reasonable men around her, one of whom, in fact, tried to call her out.

One of the very best treatments of this incident is in an unlikely source: a little book of essays and sermons by the late Paul Tillich. Tillich was one of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century. Born in Germany, he was a professor of philosophy at several leading German universities, a refugee from Hitler, a professor at Union Seminary in New York City, Harvard, and finally, late in his life, the University of Chicago. He was a Lutheran minister and a theologian, but everyone—Christian or non-Christian, believer or atheist—was interested in his thought. His thought was, to say the very least, dense, difficult. But sometimes Paul Tillich could be simple and crystal clear.

About Mary he said, “She has performed an act of holy waste growing out of the abundance of her heart. Judas,” Tillich observed, “has his emotional life under control. . . . Jesus (alone) knows that without the abundance of heart nothing great can happen. . . . He knows that calculating love is not love at all.”

“The history of humankind,” Tillich continues, “is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear to waste themselves in the service of a new creation. They wasted out of the fullness of their hearts.”

Surely Tillich was thinking of those imprudent and passionate souls, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spoke out against the policies of the German government under Hitler and paid dearly for it, those brave enough to risk life itself and who often lost their lives because their hearts were so full of love for their nation, for truth and justice, that they would not allow themselves to be reasonable and prudent and silent.

What’s at stake here? “People are sick,” Tillich said, “not only because they have not received love but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves.”²

There is a remarkable scene in the middle of the motion picture *The Young Victoria*. Victoria, in her early twenties, is now Queen of England and Great Britain. Her childhood and youth have been absolutely controlled. She has been reared to be the queen. She has been trained and schooled in every appropriate word to speak and gesture to make. She cannot descend a staircase without her hand properly placed in the hand of a lady-in-waiting. And then she falls in love with Albert, a German prince. After a very proper and controlled courtship, they marry, at least in part for political reasons. In the process, however, they fall in love, wildly, passionately in love. My favorite scene happens when in the middle of a horseback ride they are caught in a rain storm. They stand under a grove of sheltering trees, waiting patiently. There are probably no rules for how to do this. But then something wonderful happens: they look in each other’s eyes and love simply overcomes restraint and control and they hold hands and run out into the rain, across a soggy field, laughing.

How sad to live your whole life and never have loved so deeply that you did something so foolish, so extravagant, that it makes you blush to think of it. How sad to have lived your whole life without ever throwing caution to the wind and doing

² Paul Tillich, “Holy Waste,” *The New Being* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2005), 46–49.

something wonderfully outrageous. How sad never to have loved so much that you would have given everything—your life itself—for the sake of it.

Frederick Buechner writes that if the church is ever destroyed, it will not be “just from without by a world that sees it as a dead-end street but by people like you and me who destroy it from within by our deadness and staleness, our failure to be brave, to be human, to take chances.”³

“Without the abundance of heart, nothing great can happen,” Paul Tillich wrote. “Do not suppress in yourselves the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender. . . . Keep yourself open for the creative moment. Do not suppress the impulse to do what Mary did at Bethany. You will be reproached as she was. But Jesus was on her side and he is also on yours.”⁴

Next week it will be Palm Sunday, and as we approach the end of this Lenten journey, we begin to think about Holy Week and a Last Supper and a crucifixion on a Friday afternoon, and I find myself asking more and more what it was like for him. He had alternatives. He knew about the charges that had been leveled at him: that he was a rabble-rouser, that he disrespected the conventions and violated the traditional morality of religion, that he was a disturber of the peace, that he was a threat to Pax Romana. He knew that people were calling him Messiah, Lord, King. He knew it could cost him his life. It would have been altogether reasonable, prudent, and so understandable had he turned around and headed north, back to Galilee, out of harm’s way, had he withdrawn from view for a while, resumed his teaching in the synagogue, practiced a little carpentry, and lived to a ripe old age. There were plenty of people who advised him to do just that.

Instead, he visited his friends, allowed Mary her act of extravagant love, and then got up the next morning and rode into Jerusalem, to his death.

What a waste. What an amazing, magnificent, holy waste.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we bend our knees and lift up our hearts, giving glory to God forever. Amen.

³ Frederick Buechner, “Dereliction,” *A Room Called Remember* (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 125.

⁴ Tillich, *The New Being*.