

“What a Waste”
John 12:1-8

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Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, “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.”

Imagine this...

Not too long ago we were visiting with some friends, Aaron and Lynn, in their home up in Milwaukee. The kids were off playing and the adults had some time to chat. It was a cool night, and so Aaron had a nice fire going in the fireplace, and it was nice to sit there by that fire with a warm drink, enjoying the evening. But then Aaron did a funny thing. He disappeared from the room and came back a minute later carrying a medium-sized duffel bag. He then dropped the duffel bag in the middle of the room and right before our eyes, he unzipped it, and we could see that it was completely full of cash—bundles and bundles of cash. And then he said, “You know what, guys? This is my salary for the past year. Every check I've cashed, I've put the money right here in this duffel bag. There's close to \$60,000 in here.” And then we watched as he took *all* of the money out of that duffel bag, and before we could say anything or stop him, *he threw it all into the fire.*

Did you imagine it? It never really happened, of course. It's a make-believe story, but could you imagine it? Chances are that you could, *right up to the part where all the money got thrown into the fire.* That's pretty unimaginable, isn't it? That's where the story becomes downright unbelievable, and utter nonsense if it's true.

Imagine this...

Jesus is visiting the home of the sisters Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus. A follow-up house call, you might call it, as just days earlier, he had raised Lazarus from the dead. Martha cooks up a storm, because what else are you going to do when the guy who brought your only brother back from the dead stops by for a visit? Chop some carrots! Bake some bread! Get busy with a casserole! Communicate your love and thanks with the amount of food you can prepare. Martha, we know, would have made a fantastic Presbyterian.

But Martha's sister, Mary, does a funny thing. She disappears from the room and returns a minute later carrying a small container. And when she opens it, the smell of what's inside fills the air. It's pure nard, a rare, precious, imported ointment from the East. The container that Mary is holding is relatively small, but the oil inside is worth close to 300 denarii—the equivalent of a year's salary. And she anoints Jesus' feet with it.

I wonder if at first Martha, Lazarus, and the disciples thought this to be a bizarre gesture—nice, maybe, but a little strange. But then Mary keeps going, she keeps anointing *and keeps anointing*. Finally she pours more and more than enough—too much, really—on Jesus' feet. The aroma must have been suffocating. “Mary, dear, you're using way too much.” But she won't be stopped. She tips the jar over entirely, every last drop spilling out onto Jesus' feet. And still somehow it's not enough. And so she begins to wipe them with her hair. Weeping, cleaning, anointing. Dumping it all out—every last drop.

At last she finishes cleaning Jesus' feet with her hair. And I imagine there followed then an awkward silence in the room. How does one break the ice after a woman intentionally tips a year's salary's worth of perfume onto Jesus' feet and onto the floor? What do you say after such an embarrassingly intimate and public display of love *and waste*? What do you say to Mary, whose hair is now drenched with perfume and covered with dust?

Lazarus might have said, “So, is that casserole done yet?”

Martha might have said, “Let's open some windows and air this place out.”

Instead it was Judas who spoke, and he probably said what everyone was really thinking: “What a waste! Why wasn't this perfume sold?” In other words: “We're all dirt poor, traveling around the country on a shoestring with resources few and far between. What's gotten into you, Mary? What a waste!”

The story strikes a nerve in 2013, as we are made mindful of waste, perhaps more often than we'd like. But the stats are out there. We waste money—on things we don't need, on things that break easily, on things that aren't good for us...

In one year, Americans waste 6 billion dollars in unused gift cards, 7 billion in ATM fees, and 49 billion in credit card interest.

The average family throws away \$2,275 worth of food every year. As a nation, 40 percent of our food goes uneaten. That's more than 20 pounds of food per person *every month*. This means that Americans are wasting \$165 billion worth of food each year. [1]

We waste time, too. Every year Americans waste 5.5 billion hours of their time sitting in traffic—sitting, mind you, with their engines running, which wastes 2.9 billion gallons of gas. [2]

Tell us that we're being self-absorbed, narcissists who smell funny and don't love our neighbors, but *please* don't tell us how *wasteful* we've been. Nothing gets us worked up like knowing that we've wasted our time, our money, our efforts, bits and pieces of our lives... And so when Mary dumps a year's salary worth of oil out onto Jesus' feet, we either shout out with Judas, “*What a waste?*” or we awkwardly blend in with the other disciples, too stunned or embarrassed to say anything at all.

Mary's gift is an overboard gift of extreme extravagance. But maybe she looked at Jesus and knew that his death was at hand, and maybe she looked at that jar and thought, "How many times in my life will I have a chance to be this crazy? Maybe never again." I wonder if she said to herself, "If I can't be generous and extravagant right now, it's probably true that I'll never really be generous or extravagant." And so Mary treats that jar of perfume like she's got a hundred others sitting in the back closet collecting dust.

Some people have the gift of being able to look at the world that way. Some people are simply blessed with the sense that nothing in this world is truly valuable if you can't somehow turn it into a gift.

Marie Marley has written a lot about Alzheimer's disease, and she's experienced a lot. Her husband, Ed, her soul mate, once a college professor, had slid into deep dementia, not capable of holding memories from one day to the next, or even one hour to the next. Marie struggled knowing how to care for him—how to keep the routine things going, but also how to live into her relationship with him, now that he was this person who could never remember their latest conversation.

Knowing that he was a big fan of classical music, though, she splurged big-time and hired a concert violinist to come and visit Ed. "Wear a tux," she instructed over the phone. And so the violinist arrived, looking ready for a night on stage, only this stage was Ed's tiny apartment at the Alzheimer's care center, where he sat on a folding chair just a couple feet away from Ed, who sat on his couch.

He began—a Strauss waltz, lively and luscious. Marie "watched as his bow flew up and down, his fingers danced around, and his head snapped back on the high notes. Ed looked captivated. His eyes glued to Don, he had a rapt expression on his face and moved in time with the music."

"Bravo! Bravo!" he boomed in his deep bass voice while clapping at the end of the waltz. "That was the most beautiful moo-sic I have heard ever in my entire, very long, *and I emphasize very long* life!"

The musician thanked him and began playing a Romanian piece. "Bravo! Bravo!" he called out again, clapping like before. "That was the most beautiful moo-sic I've heard," he said.

Then the third piece, a light airy Gypsy tune. Ed's eyes twinkled with the music, and when it was over: "Bravo! Bravo! That was the most beautiful moo-sic I have heard ever in my entire very long, *and I emphasize very long* life."

The concert went on for another half hour, violinist playing and Ed happily lost in each moment. At the end, Ed asked, "When are you coming back?"

Marie jumped in and said, "Tomorrow." She always said she'd come back tomorrow, because it made Ed happy and he'd never know the difference. [3]

What a waste... The most expensive live classical music money can buy for a man who'll forget it all in an hour or two... what a waste. What a wonderful, live-giving, death-defying *waste!*

These days it seems like we're being trained to cut waste whenever and wherever we can. Spend less, eat smart, use time wisely, cut out distractions... We're like Martha in the kitchen cooking up a storm, taking advantage of each and every minute. But maybe we need a Mary to come along now and then and teach us how to *waste*.

Fred Rogers—we remember him as TV's Mr. Rogers—once told a story about something that happened at a Special Olympics race. “For the 100-yard dash there were nine contestants,” Mr. Rogers began, “all of them so-called physically or mentally disabled. All nine of them assembled at the starting line and at the sound of the gun, they took off. But not long afterward one little boy stumbled and fell and hurt his knee and began to cry. The other eight children heard him crying; they slowed down, turned around and ran back to him. Every one of them ran back to him. One little girl with Down Syndrome bent down and kissed the boy and said, “This'll make it better.” And the little boy got up and he the rest of the runners linked their arms together and joyfully walked to the finish line. They all finished the race at the same time. And when they did, everyone in that stadium stood up and clapped and whistled and cheered for a long, long, time.” [4]

We need teachers to show us how to waste—waste the head start, waste the easy win, waste the old expectations... faithfully waste the lives we've been given for the love of the ones who've fallen. Mary's that kind of teacher in John's gospel—wasting her dignity and her tears and not to mention all that nard—weeping with love, wasting it all on Jesus.

Of course, living faithfully and wastefully in this way is a bit easier when you know that our God is a God who loves so wastefully. Friends, the gospel of Jesus is the story of God not holding back, but rather loving all the way, dumping it all out, sharing it all, sparing none.

Mary's act of wasteful love and devotion mirror's God's own action in our world, loving humanity and Creation fully in and through the life of Jesus, sparing nothing, not even his life. Thanks be to God for love completely poured out for the world. Thanks be to God for the chance we have each day to love so wastefully. Amen.

Generous God, could we, with our love and devotion to you, be so wasteful? Could we behave like there's always more to come—like you will supply us with every good gift that we need? Thank you for your extravagant grace and empower us to live in and through its power and abundance. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

1. “Wasted: How America Is Losing Up to 40 Percent of Its Food from Farm to Fork to Landfill,” an article that appeared on the National Resources Defense Council:

<http://www.nrdc.org/food/wasted-food.asp>

2. From Texas A&M Transportation Institute 2012 Urban Mobility Report,

<http://mobility.tamu.edu>

3. “An Alzheimer's Love Story: ‘Please Wear a Tux’” by Marie Marley appeared on the *Huffington Post* July 31, 2012.

4. “Fred McFeely Rogers on Boethius, Saint-Exupery and Yo-Yo Ma,” Excerpts from the 2002 Commencement Address at Dartmouth College