

ISAIAH 43:16-21
PSALM 126
PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14
JOHN 12:1-8

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 3, 2022; Year C

Waste Not! Want Not!

Wasteful! One of the things we learn early in life, something that is deeply engrained in all of us, instilled in our brains, is that being wasteful is never a good thing, even a character flaw perhaps, never good practice, not a good habit in the least. How many of us growing up, when presented with an entree that was not so very appealing, like say a casserole—I'm just saying—as we annoyingly played with the food on our plate, were reminded to think of the starving children in Africa or Asia or God only knows where, who would be the most appreciative, the most grateful recipients, thrilled at even the prospect of tasting even a morsel of any number of foods to which we were snootily thumbing our noses, disdaining and disparaging, trying desperately to feed to the dog or the disposal or the nearest garbage can. Indeed, we do live in a wasteful society as one of, if not, the richest nations on the planet. Waste not! Want not!

Our landfills are full of perfectly good things, a variety of useful materials and other items that could be refurbished and repurposed, reused in any number of ways. To use one of my favorite phrases, to be recalibrated and retrofitted! Storage units are overflowing capacity, burgeoning with stuff! And, yes, I am specifically preaching to the choir and that choir would be a soloist, me! Let's be clear about this, I am a collector not a hoarder and only I know the difference! As one movie more than suggests, we Americans suffer from a bad case of "Afluenza!" How many of us have gone dumpster diving and found real treasures, items that were almost if not brand spanking new? I am a thrift store junky and am amazed at the useful and decorative things I

find there, and very cheap compared to retail! Thank God someone thought to make the donation rather than dumping their unwanted leftovers in the garbage. After all, one person's trash is another person's treasure! I continue to be amazed at the number of people who are just too plain lazy to recycle, an exercise that demands no more time and effort than it does to toss the recyclable item in a waste can. At the end of our lives, if we were to ever consider the amount of time and energy that we waste on most days, it would probably come as a sobering shock. Jimmy Buffett sings about "wasting away in Margaritaville," something I would have to reconsider, however, not seeing any time spent at the sea in the sand and under the sun a waste of any precious anything, time included. But I digress; I often do!

Today, in the Witness from the Gospels in John, we find a most elaborate, excessive, yes, extravagantly wasteful act, all carried out by a thoughtless, silly, frivolous woman who was flippantly dispersing, randomly, if not haphazardly, intentionally spilling an expensive perfume all over her rabbi in a wanton display of whatever was driving her motives in what was obviously a case of temporary insanity. Yes, this was a most costly and opulent offering that surely this rarest of substances could have been used for far better purposes, at least if given even the shallowest, the slightest, consideration from a surface, pragmatic, perspective. Yes, she might as well have poured it down the drain or flushed it down the toilet! Surely, she had taken leave of her senses! As per usual, Jesus was attending a dinner party, engagements that were familiar, a frequent part of Jesus' and his entourage's itinerary. Once again, all about hospitality! All his groupies were always looking for an invite, hoping to get on the coveted waiting list! These meals were more than just meals, merely occasions to dine, eating being one of life's necessities. No, these dinner parties were choreographed events and thus always laden with meaning in the ancient world. As we know from our readings, they were common with Jesus and found all throughout the

four Gospel narratives. Yes, these kinds of meals were not just meals in this day and time, but were highly symbolic gatherings laden with deep meanings, each guest seated based on customary privilege and prestige, each pivotal location revealing something substantive about a given guest. It was all about the pecking order! The higher up you sat in terms of proximity to the host, the more indicative of your importance or status. Another feature of eating with Jesus, is that even though he is invited as an honored guest, he inevitably and invariably becomes the host, fulfilling his role as rabbi, captivating the rapt attention of everyone in attendance. And of course, Jesus was always the center of attention, quickly turning from guest into host! Today, we find him holding forth in a familiar setting, no doubt he and his disciples taking a much needed and deserved respite from their journeys as they all crashed at the pad of his closest friends other than the twelve, at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Now you need to picture the scene for a meal in the ancient world. When it says they were at table, that is a literal rendering because there were no chairs. One sat in perhaps a lotus position or, more likely, reclined sideways in what for us would be a rather bizarre, strange, and uncomfortable manner. For those of us whose legs are not the same length, this balance can be a might challenging and even painful. I hate to sit on the floor! As a sidebar, I have often wondered if this was the same dinner party recorded in Luke in which Mary and Martha get in a tiff over fulfilling their traditional roles as servants to their guests, Mary stubbornly choosing the better thing by sitting at the feet of Jesus. It is all about feet here! And I dare suggest you do some biblical homework, and you will discover that in the Bible feet or not always feet but are euphemisms for other body parts! Anything more and I might get in trouble! Information not exactly suitable for a Sunday sermon! Check it for yourself! Inquiring minds want to know! Oh well!

At any rate, at some point in the festivities—we are not told if the shocking event took place prior to, during, of after, dinner, the writer

recalls what on a first or second or third glance is a most provocative, even sordid, salacious or scandalous episode. Mary, of course it had to be Mary, the one then and now rumored to be in an undefined but definitely had the characteristics of what is described as an intimate relationship with Jesus, and according to one non-canonical source his closest disciple. By the way, according to this same source, the Gospel of Mary, Mary supposedly portrayed Peter as being more jealous of her than he apparently was of John, the beloved! Suddenly out of nowhere Mary appears with a pound of perfume made of pure nard, a very expensive substance indeed. It was much like the frankincense we read about in the story of the visitation of the Wise Men early in Matthew's infancy narrative. Very costly stuff, often reserved for a burial! It would somewhat mask the "stinketh", to use a little King James English, at least for a short while, in order to appropriately tend to the body! In retrospect, upon further review, how thoughtful, yes, prudent, Mary really was! She carefully unwrapped the perfume of nard and gently, the perhaps wildly, began to anoint Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair, a scene that no doubt was a bit troubling and even off-putting to the other guests, all no doubt wondering to themselves, to use our vernacular, if the couple should get a room. I am reminded of Salome's seductive dance before Herod that cost John the Baptist his head! And besides, this is no place for a titillating table dance, lending itself to the question, "who's on the pole?" **MARY! This behavior between a man and a woman, especially in a public setting, would have been more than frowned upon as a serious breach of protocol and etiquette. Miss Manners and Martha Stewart would have been appalled! No PDA! No public displays of affection allowed . . . ever! What a show Mary put on for all the world to see!**

Well, as fate would have it, Judas was having none of it! The one who was accused of stealing from the group's treasury, who would take thirty pieces of silver in an instant to sell his mother's soul and surely willing to sell out Jesus, feigned being appalled at the graphic sight.

He was obviously taken aback by these bizarre, strange, proceedings taking place before his innocent eyes. Yes, the proof would eventually be in the proverbial pudding—assuming that Judas really existed—something that a few reputable scholars debate as a legitimate argument. Nonetheless, assuming his legitimacy, Judas sought any way imaginable to stop these perverse proceedings in their tracks, coming up with the greatest, the noblest, excuse. How thoughtful! How beneficent! How prudent! How selfless! Ah, beauty indeed is in the eye of the beholder! While criticizing this absolute waste of good “nardly” perfume—made up word—Judas self-righteously opined that this perfume could have been sold and the proceeds from the sale given to the poor. Wow, what a generous, virtuous, idea! So very Jesus-like! And perhaps some individuals, including you and me, if completely objective, far removed from any bias or need to defend Jesus’ honor at all costs, would probably agree with Judas’ sensible assessment. His observation was reasonable, his argument certainly in line with Jesus’ normal way of thinking regarding those who live on the fringes, standing with and for the down and out of society, the disenfranchised and marginalized who barely scrape together the bare necessities in making their ends meet, yes, those Jesus called the last and the least. It is a fair and cogent defense of his position. Judas had learned well at the master’s feet! “Not so fast, my friend,” as football commentator Lee Corso says on ESPN! Hold your horses! Let’s not make a rush to judgement! After all, this is Jesus we are talking about here!

Throughout the Church’s history, good, bad, and often ugly, the Church has struggled mightily between maintaining the institution, hoping to achieve even a modicum of institutional integrity, and being a selfless organization committed to giving itself away to meet the needs of a needy world. There is tension! There is balance, except when there is not! Part of maintaining an institution, at least most institutions, is the necessity for maintaining a facility which usually

includes the hiring and paying of staff, yes, all demanding the almighty dollar. And yes, I like my job and my income, thank you very much! Therein is an immediate catch, a definite hook, a dilemma wrapped in a conundrum. Look at the Gospel narratives and the role that money takes in soiling perhaps the greatest enterprise, faithful or otherwise, the earth has ever known. Yes, Judas was a bad apple. We get that! But, as we know, there is often a Judas in every system. That is the nature of any financial beast, temptation always lurking in the mix.

Let's look at some examples in the Church's history. The first and most obvious that comes to mind is the building of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in Rome, a massive, monumental, yes, ginormous, project that took decades to complete. Building this great edifice demanded incredible resources of every kind, yes, including a financial package that continues to be absolutely mind boggling when considering the time during which the lofty structure was built. The Protestant Reformation began with Martin Luther's critique, his hyper criticism in those infamous 95 Theses, most notably condemning the rampant abusive sale of indulgences, including the promise that a purchaser could get a relative freed from purgatory, a veritable get out of jail free card. And of course, all this nonsense certified by the bishop under the auspices of Pope Leo X, a most dubious and aggrandizing sort. No wall in a faithful Catholic's medieval home should be without one, and everyone was a faithful and fearful Catholic back in the day. The local Grand commissioner for indulgences, named Johann Tetzel, (formerly German friar and preacher and then Inquisitor for Poland and Saxony) hawked these worthless pieces of paper in the way then that conniving, thieving, prosperity, non-faith-healing shyster TV preachers now sell anointing oil, water from the Jordan, and, of course, those wonderful prayer hankies. Who could go without such wonderful spiritual accoutrement? These demonic devices no different, no better or worse now than they were then, born of greed and narcissistic fulfillment, no

matter how well-perfumed any of them might be. And yet, tourists from all over the world flock to Rome and to the Vatican to turn aside and see the great sight, a testament to humanity's ability to create opulent masterpieces of brick, mortar, and stone, yes, in sincerity most of the time, seeking to honor the God they serve and worship. And what would Christmas Eve be without tuning in to the late night rebroadcast of Christmas Eve at the Vatican, complete with a commentator, who like any sportscaster, tells us what we already know! And while we are on the subject, think of all the great Cathedrals, especially those in Europe that attract so many tourists, their entry fees and donations keeping these largely empty hallowed halls of worship afloat. You get my point!

I will never forget the debate at Virginia-Highland Church in Atlanta as I sought to move the congregation from a traditional, if not conservative, Southern Baptist church toward becoming a member of the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and then the liberal Alliance of Baptists and finally a home affiliated with the United Church of Christ. When I was called to this church, my first pastorate out of seminary, raw and green, the congregation owned a candlelighter/extinguisher that they used for weddings. No liturgical accoutrement, no candles, crosses, and the like. A historically non-liturgical congregation, changing the worship style from a quasi-revivalist mode to a highly liturgical/eucharistic one was a quick visual, a positive move that I knew would have immediate impact, especially in the area of numeric growth. After all, this was now a church by default now conveniently and strategically located, perfectly situated, in one of the most progressive neighborhoods, then and now called intown Atlanta. During the decade of the 1990s the church would spend a huge sum of money purchasing the necessary liturgical enhancements, with many of us demanding that if we were going to go this route that we would do it right and not skimp on cheap Altarware and Paraments in our purchases, just like with my cigars or scotch! Yes, there was pushback, a whole lot of scuttlebutts about

securing these sacramental items, much discussion and dialogue, a serious debate ensuing. Why is this money not being designated to missions? Would we choose objects over social justice, a core component inherent in the emerging identity of this church's ministries? It was and is a good and fair question that had to be addressed. Yes, these inquiries had to be answered honestly and forthrightly to everyone's satisfaction, agree or disagree. It was finally determined that if you are going to be something, whatever that something is, you cannot fake it and you must have the right equipment to not only reflect a certain perceived reality, a mood or aura, but to be able to perform accurately and appropriately, not to ever be confused with performance. Making these mostly onetime purchases proved to be the prudent thing to do, the right thing, not only creating a visual that to this day enhances the worship experience of those in attendance but helping project a specific look that aided in both the church's numerical and liturgical growth.

Another example comes from a neighboring church in Atlanta that struggled mightily between its own social justice demands and the perceived need of a new tracker pipe organ. As with the complexities that once dominated conversations at Virginia-Highland related to Altarware and Paraments, the issues surrounding the acquisition of a pipe organ swirled throughout the congregational system at this local church, everyone choosing sides in what everyone hoped would not become a battle royale. The debates were intense and candid and in the end the need for the pipe organ temporarily outweighed the other need which was to proactively be a church on mission, fulfilling its call to tangible social justice. To this day, when one attends worship at this church, the Sanctuary is filled with the beautiful and melodic tones that only a pipe organ, what a music snob would call a real organ, can achieve. I believe that both churches made the right decision, even as they made sure they did not sacrifice one goal or objective for the other, achieving a very difficult balance and perspective. This is the

ecclesial world in which all of us live and breathe as faithful members of local missional congregations. I confess to a personal bias. I do not wish to worship in a barn or a business. This is my preference and prerogative. Not only do I enjoy a certain worship space aesthetic, but I confess that I need the beauty of sacred space to help transport me to another dimension, the realm of mystery and awe and wonder producing transcendence, as shallow as that observation might seem. All these musings bring my sermon closer to home. My final example comes from within our local context as the First Congregational United Church of Christ. There was a day in a not-so-distant memory, an bellwether time in your history in which you as a beloved community had to make an important corporate decision about renovating this sacred space, yes, a crucible moment. I applaud what you together decided to do, what you did as a result of what were no doubt careful deliberations, enhancing this sacred space in which we meet every week, and on other special occasions. Every time we gather here, we are able to enjoy the fruits of those loving labors. Job well done! I think these examples speak in their own way to the dynamics and the dilemma on display on a certain evening at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

As I ponder these debates and delicate decisions, I am reminded of the sacred idea that we walk by faith and not by sight. Hopefully, prayerfully, we do so in every decision we make, knowing that everyone will not be on board whatever the issue, seeking to achieve the golden standard of consensus. That is who we are as a church, proudly founded in the “congregational way,” a great tradition that seeks to involve the whole of the body politic in our ecclesial polity and not relying on the whims of the few. This is especially helpful in churches in which there are members who because of means are able to contribute more and subliminally believe that their substantive offerings give them an extra marble in the jar, entitles them to just a little more influence, a wee bit more power. I am thrilled to report that

this dynamic is something that appears nonexistent here at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Eagle River. Thanks be to God! In our ecclesial and institutional efforts, sometimes we get it right, and no doubt, sometimes we get it wrong, but we always desire that our efforts are efficacious, our motives pure. Not being failproof is normal in our operational procedures, part and parcel of our humanity, who we claim to be and hopefully are as faithful human beings seeking to do the best and most we can do, yes, corporately speaking, all together.

Mary had to make a quick decision, a split second choice that for her was clearly the right moment. As we all know, gifts come in all shapes and sizes. Mary's gift was certainly ginormous in every way imaginable, a gift of extravagant love, yes, using John Shelby Spong's infamous image, "wasteful love," whatever was the nature of that love. Let me count the ways! Time seemed to stand still but was of the essence and Mary knew it and knew she had to act, right then and right there. She had been saving this costly nard, no doubt realizing that Jesus' was already on a death march, dead man walking. I am sure she had taken the time prior to consider keeping this ointment for his burial, something he would have not lived to know, tell, or enjoy. And so, she seized the moment, even and especially in this setting, risking public ridicule, embarrassment and humiliation, knowing there would be consequences, ramifications, repercussions for her actions, questions and criticisms. She boldly risked showing real determination while exhibiting great leadership skills in making a crucible decision. She pounced and took the proverbial bull by the horns and offered her sacrifice, her sacrament, her testimonial to her love for this man, whatever complexities described their love affair.

Every day we are faced with decisions, choices to be made, chances to be taken, most of them not so radical in nature! Yes, many of them involve doing something for the common good, for our common

humanity, while many others are all about us, our needs and wants, our appropriate narcissistic tendencies, buying or doing things that contribute to our personal hubris and yes, growth. It is all about stuff, life stuff, stuff that enhances and enables, even empowers and emboldens, our self-care, aiding and abetting our emotional, mental, physical, and even our spiritual health. Yes, sometimes a new car or boat or an outfit, etc., makes all the difference in one's disposition! It really is okay to pamper oneself on occasion! Only you, and you alone, can make those determinations, can know for certain within your being what makes you tick, is life affirming, and makes you the magical, mystical, delightfully intuitive and engaging persons created in the divine image as you all are. So, it is with us individually as unique persons! So, it is with us who have chosen by our own free will, making the serious decision to join together as a local missional church, striving to become the best beloved faith community, as caring and compassionate as we can ever be. As in all matters of our way of life, we walk by faith and not by sight! There but by the grace of God we go, always hoping and praying, seeking to get it right at least some, if not most of the time. On a certain fateful, and perhaps faithful, night, Mary has given us a hint and has shown us not only a way, but perhaps a better way. Sometimes it is good to be kind to self because I am sure she got as much satisfaction from her gracious, no glorious, gift as did the recipient, Jesus, who accepted it wholeheartedly, with no equivocation, no hesitation, no reservations whatsoever, no questions asked. Waste Not! Want Not! Take that to the bank, Judas, party pooper extraordinaire! Sometimes, you just got to come to the party, welcomed just as you are, never knowing what sights you may see, and perhaps if you arrive early you might just up and get a show to tell!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, a wasteful God who thankfully wastes a lot of time and energy on the likes of you and me! Amen and amen!

