The Rev. Jeremy Troxler delivered this sermon on August 24, 2011, during the 2011 Convocation on the Rural Church in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

“Beautiful Waste”
Mark 14: 1-10

“While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of pure nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.

But some were there who said to one another in anger, ‘Why was the ointment wasted in this way?’ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.

And they scolded her. But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone: why do you trouble her? She has performed a good and beautiful deed for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.

She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand before burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

While the preachers and bible scholars are planning their hit job and conniving to kill him, Jesus is lounging with a leper in the trailer park.

Jesus is in the neighborhood of Bethany, a place name which means “House of the Poor” in Hebrew - a place where the almshouse for the poor was likely located. Yet again Jesus is eating with a social outcast, he and his friends sharing a spoon with a sore-covered sick man named Simon. You would think, during the last week of his life, that Jesus might have more important places to be, might have more important things to do. Unless Jesus maybe has a different definition of what and where and who is important.

As they’re eating, suddenly an unnamed woman crashes the party and does something that makes every jaw drop. She brazenly wades into this roomful of men carrying a beautiful, translucent, alabaster jar. The jar draws every eye in the room. It has a long, narrow neck, stopped up at the top, and it looks like delicate fine china made out of quartz crystal. It looks like the kind of heirloom that should be behind glass at a museum. It is the kind of precious urn that poets write poems about.

The woman walks up to Jesus without a word, carrying the fragile jar with two hands, an intent look of purpose in her eyes. Everyone expects her to gently hand Jesus the jar: maybe it’s a gift of some kind, its contents a donation to the cause. Instead, the woman lifts the jar above her head as if she has an axe chopping wood, and she hammers it down and smashes the top of the jar on the edge of the table. Jagged shards clatter on the tabletop and fall to the ground.

That beautiful jar – demolished. On top of that, now none of the contents of that alabaster jar can be saved for later. There can be no holding it back - it is all going to be used now.

A sweet fragrance begins to fill the room: a modern perfume company might call it “Hint of Jasmine” or “Fresh Ocean Breeze.” People in that day called it the aroma of spikenard, a rare scented luxury perfume that had been imported all the way from the Himalaya mountains. That perfume ointment is even more precious than the alabaster jar. Many of the folks there have probably never even seen spikenard, much less a whole jar-full – even when the rich folks (presumably like this woman) use...
spikenard, they will just put on a little dab, rationing it like it’s liquid gold. But this woman, this woman stands behind Jesus, and she doesn’t just dab a little bit on his wrist: she upends that now-shattered alabaster jar, and she dumps the whole thing, the whole thing, over top of Jesus’ head, shaking it until the last drop is poured out. The thick ointment runs down Jesus hair, spreads slowly down the sides of his face. It is like the description of the anointing of Moses’ brother Aaron’s in Psalm 133, which says “how good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity,” for it is like “precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.”

The unnamed woman has just anointed the anointed one. In the Old Testament, it wasn’t just prophets like Aaron who were anointed. The king of Israel was anointed when the prophet poured a flask of olive oil over the king’s head, a symbol of God’s choice and God’s blessing. We don’t have any parallel to this anointing in our culture: the closest one I can think of happens after a football team has won the Super Bowl, and a group of players sneaks up behind the head coach and dumps an orange cooler of Gatorade over the coach’s head. (Have you every dreamed of preaching a sermon so good that someone would pour a cooler of Gatorade over your head? Because I haven’t . . . never thought of that).

Jesus, too, is anointed, has the Gatorade splashed over his head. Jesus is the new King, the Messiah, the Christ, which means the anointed one. But his anointing doesn’t come on a throne on a stage from the hand of the powerful. Jesus’ coronation comes from an unnamed woman in the house of a leper in the neighborhood of the poor. And his is a double-anointing: it is not just the symbolic anointing of a king to rule, it is the practical anointing of a body for burial. This woman, perhaps alone among the people in the room, shows that she knows exactly where Jesus’ life is heading. So she decides to send her flowers while he is still alive. She gives the most precious thing she has to a man who is apparently about to die. She gives her best for him. In doing so, says Elizabeth Norquist, the woman is the original example of the little fictional shepherd boy who drummed a special rum-pum-pum-pum for Jesus, or the clown of God who juggled to make the baby Jesus smile.

But to the men gathered around Jesus, this woman is none of those things. She is a frivolous fool. The men totally miss the symbolism. The Scripture says that the men’s literal response to the woman’s gesture is to snort like an angry horse: Huh! (Sadly the first, but not the last time that a group of men in the church will belittle or refuse to honor a woman who offers her gifts to serve Jesus.) That PPR committee, I mean, those men, look at what the woman has done and they scold her: “What a waste! What a waste! That ointment, not to mention the jar, could have been sold and the money given to the poor or one of our local non-profits. And instead, she’s just spent $20,000 on an aromatherapy scalp massage for Jesus. What a waste!”

But Jesus defends her. Jesus defends here. Maybe he sees in her act a reflection what he himself is in the process of doing: one who is rich becoming flesh and wading into this Poor-House of a world, allowing his body to be broken like an alabaster jar, and pouring out all of the love within himself for others, wasting it all on sinners, down to the last drop, no holding back. For whatever reason, Jesus is enchanted by what the woman has done. He defends her. Against the voices of condemnation brought by spiritual accounting, by the impromptu waste management department, Jesus defends her. “You leave her alone,” he says. “You leave her alone. Why are you burdening her? She has done a good and beautiful thing for me. What she could do, she has done. She has anointed my body for burial beforehand. And truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told as a memorial to her.”
In the midst of this, Jesus reminds his pragmatic friends that they will always have the poor with them, and they can show kindness to the bodies of the poor whenever they would like—whereas his time in this body is now short. It’s ironic that ever since, some people have used this passage, on the poor being always with us, to justify the position that we should just accept poverty as a natural fact of life, and not be too concerned about helping those in need. It’s ironic, first, because Jesus says this to defend a radical and sacrificial act of generosity in a place called “The Poor-House.” It’s ironic second, (or maybe just ignorant) because Jesus is here quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 15. Here is the whole quotation: “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, since the poor will always be with, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” The mostly likely interpretation is that Jesus is telling his friends here, “If you are any kind of followers of mine, then you to are always going to have the poor close to you, just as I have had: you, too, should be in the House of the Poor, and they should be worshipping with you. So believe me, you will have lots of opportunity then to sell your perfume and give it to the needy.”

The disciples look at the woman’s act of devotion, at that shattered jar and the puddle of perfume on the floor, and they just see a waste. But Jesus sees and feels something else. Jesus sees and feels a beautiful act of love.

Once, Jesus had told his followers, “Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Presbyterian pastor Emily Anderson points out that the word used in that verse for “lose” your life is the same word the disciples use to describe the “loss” or “waste” of the perfume. One way of translating Jesus’ earlier words is, “Those who waste their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Jesus invites us to “waste” our life on him, in the same sense that this woman has supposedly “wasted” her most precious possession on a dying Messiah.

Paul Tillich wrote that genuine love will always appear to some as a kind of extravagant waste. Love does not follow the cold utilitarian calculus of a spreadsheet. Love does not perform cost benefit analyses before giving itself away: “That perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor!” The logic of love makes it own math, and always overflows the bounds the ledger book. Love is priceless.

The woman may have “wasted” her jar of perfume, Paul Tillich says, but it is a holy waste, a saving waste, a beautiful waste: the waste of extravagant love that comes from a full, overflowing, abundant heart. If she “wastes” her perfume, she wastes it in the same way that God “wastes” God’s love in nature and in history, always giving us more than we need, more than we can imagine, more than we can deserve.

In her act of devotion, the woman of this story doesn’t just offer us an image of what God does for us every day. She also shows us what ministry is: it is an act of beauty and love, done not for the watchers, but done for Jesus. And anything done for Jesus, is never wasted.

Philip Yancey writes of how, during the renovation of an ancient cathedral in England, a beautiful statue was discovered hidden within the crawlspace behind a wall. The statue was hundreds of years old,
yet no other human being had laid eyes on it since it was crafted and sealed behind the wall by its sculptor. This was intentional: the sculptor had not created the statue for human eyes to behold: it was made for the eyes of God alone. The statue was there, whether anyone saw it or not: its beauty not to be found in the eye of any other beholder but God.

I think that sculptor knew something that the woman in our story knew. That when you love God, when you do something for God, even if no one else appreciates it, there is no such thing as a waste.

I think the woman in this story, and I think that sculptor, might have been a good rural pastors, because there are days when we pour out what is precious to us, and others don’t understand. And there are days when ministry means crafting beautiful statues that will remain hidden behind walls – when we drive an hour each way to pray by the bedside of a comatose church member, when we stay late after worship ignoring our rumbling stomach to listen to the chatty teenager, when we give out of our own pocket to help a community member in need – and the only one who will know about it or understand it for what it is, is Jesus.

Philip Yancey once told another story about his friend, Dr. Paul Brand. Dr. Brand devoted his life to understanding leprosy and to helping lepers. He was inspired by the Jesus who did things like eat at the house of Simon the leper. And Philip Yancey would visit his friend Dr. Brand at this compound for lepers where Dr Brand lived, and when he visited Yancey would occasionally hear Dr. Brand preach in the tiny Chapel there. And what he would hear in that little Chapel, with just a few lepers present, would be a sermon that Dr. Brand had worked on for ten hours, and that would preach in the world’s biggest pulpits.

Dr. Brand would just break open the jar of his time and his energy and he would pour it all out over the heads of this small group of lepers – because he wasn’t just doing it for the lepers.

In a physics class, we were asked a philosophical conundrum: “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” One person said, “No, but the other trees laugh at it.” But sometimes, in the things that we do for our people and our community, maybe there is a little part of us that wonders, If a beautiful ministry takes place in a rural place, and it feels like there is no one there to behold it, does it make a sound? Does it make a difference?


Sometimes there is an unholy chorus of voices in our heads, even in our churches, that looks at our ministries, that looks at the empty pews, or that looks at the statistical report, and it says, “What a waste! What a waste!” But Jesus defends us. Jesus defends us. What Jesus says is this: “Leave him or her alone. Leave them alone. Why do you burden him? Why do you burden her? She has done what she could. He has done what he could. They have done a good and beautiful thing for me.”

I think of how this woman in our story pours out all of her precious gift upon the body of Christ, even though it is a body that is about to be laid in a tomb. I am told that many of our churches are dying, that the body of Christ will soon be laid in a tomb. I don’t believe it, and even if some of that happens, we need not be scared of tombs: first on Easter, and ever after, the body of Christ has shown that it knows its way out of a grave. But what fascinates me is that the woman in our story is going to give her best to the body of Christ independent of whether that body lives or dies, independent of the outcome –
whether he lives or dies, whether the anointing is in honor of his rule or in preparation for his death, she will pour out her best in service to Jesus, and know that she has done a beautiful, holy thing.

Would we? Will we?

Will Willimon was once driving to a Conference in eastern North Carolina along with a colleague who was an undergraduate professor at Duke. As he was riding along, Willimon asked the professor, “Say, didn’t Sarah Smith tell me that she was one of your students?” The professor said, “Yes, I did. You know, Sarah was one of the brightest students I ever taught – she could have gone on to law school or medical school – I was surprised when she went to Divinity School, of all places.” Willimon said, “Well, at the Divinity School we call that operation rescue.” Willimon said, “You know, I think Sarah’s church where she is pastor is just off the highway here – would you like to go see it?” The professor said, “I’d love to see what she’s doing now.”

So they turned off the highway, and they went past woods, and they crossed over some old railroad tracks, and they drove out past trailer parks, and they saw a faded United Methodist Church sign pointing down a dirt road. They turned down the dirt road, and bounced up and down on it through more trees, and finally they turned into the gravel parking lot of a little, rundown, dilapidated clapboard church. The white paint was peeling off the sides; the roof was covered with waterspots. In front, a half-broken sign was dangling at a forty-five degree angle. The sign read, “Trinity United Methodist Church/ Pastor: Sarah Smith.”

They sat there for a moment idling in the gravel parking lot, sitting in silence. Finally the professor shook his head and snorted: “Damn. What a waste.”

Willimon said his own response should have been, “Beautiful.”

“But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone: why do you trouble her? She has performed a good and beautiful deed for me. She has done what she could. . . . Truly I tell you, those who waste their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.’”

Thanks be to God. Amen.