

- Let us pray. Help us, Lord, to become masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take our hands and work through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our lips and speak through them. And take our hearts and set them on fire. For Christ's sake, amen. My text is the fifth verse of this 12th chapter, the Gospel of John, which we have just heard. It is the big question, the big question of the gospel. And the big question of this sermon. Why was not this ointment sold for 300 pence and given to the poor? Why not? Why not, indeed. It is a very, very good, sensible, prudent, pragmatic question. And it would have been a sensible, prudent question no matter who asked it. Why was it not sold and the money given to the poor? Would this not be a Biblical precedent for compassionate conservatism? Making a profit and doing some good with it. Who in this congregation could dispute the soundness of that principle? Now you and I know something about this text, we know that we are not supposed to agree with this solution. It's been constructed so that we know we're not supposed to consider this as a useful solution to the problems of poverty. Consider the source. It comes from Judas Iscariot, the treasurer of the disciples. And if that isn't bad enough, the one who a few chapters later will indeed betray our Lord. He will do that also, as we remember, out of some economic consideration. So we know we're not supposed to like this solution as the students say, "Don't go there." But is it not a tempting place to linger? Because like Judas and the rest of our Lord's entourage at that dinner party in Bethany confess it. We are mildly disturbed and not a little bit titillated, but certainly disturbed by the scene Saint John paints for us here in the 12th chapter of his Gospel. Now what is disturbing and mildly titillating about it? Well, here we are, a mild domestic moment, a Kodak moment, if you will. Jesus is at supper with His dearest friends around the table in Bethany. Among His dearest friends is to be found none other than Lazarus, whom He had recently raised from the dead. Martha is busy doing what Martha always does, cumbered with much serving, catering, organizing, bossing everybody around. And Mary, her dreamy sister, of whom we have heard before. What about Mary? Sounds like the title of a very bad summer movie. (congregation laughing) Well Mary plays her part, the part we have to come to expect of her, the unusual, the unanticipated, that moment she takes a bottle of very expensive ointment of perfume, she pours it over the feet of the Lord, and if that isn't bad enough, she then washes it with her hair. Now you have to envision this. How do you suppose that she gets in a position to wash the feet with her hair? She has to get down on her hands and knees. A rather intimate and messy gesture all at once. The sort of thing that people at the kind of dinner parties that I go to at least, would be mildly embarrassed by and would pretend not to see. It was not happening. There is no woman on the floor (congregation laughing) pouring oil on Jesus's feet and wiping it with her hair, it is not happening. (congregation laughing) By any standard this is an extravagant gesture. An overblown gesture, an hysterical gesture you might say. "Waste," Judas called it. What good does it do? Well, the first good that it does is it gets our attention. We notice Mary. We notice what she is doing. We may pretend not to, we may be mildly disturbed by it, but she and it get our attention. As a woman, Mary was meant to be seen, and not very much, but not heard at all. And yet by this gesture consider what happens. She steals the scene. She steals the scene. She does the impossible thing, for example, of stealing the scene from her brother, Lazarus. Lazarus might have been the center of attention at this dinner party. How many times do you get to have dinner with a friend who has just been raised from the dead and with the guy who did it? (congregation laughing) But Mary managed to steal the scene even from so important and interesting a guest as Lazarus,

she stole it from a dead man. And she steals the scene from Jesus. What do you do when you are trying to preach or trying to teach and some woman begins to wash your feet with her hair? Now some see here an economic parable. I understand that. But to me, it has the distinct odor of sex. Sex, I did say it, that's exactly what I said. (congregation laughing) You see Dean Willimon invites me here so that I can say the things he thinks about, but won't say. (congregation laughing) This is not about money, my friends, this is about sex. Think about it. Here is a form of sexual harassment, if you will. If Jesus were a Methodist minister, I suspect somebody would bring Him up on charges. Perhaps one of you, I can imagine any number of you considering what should be done here. You see when you combine sex, money, and religion, you have a recipe for trouble as we know only too well in religious America. So this a messy, untidy, extravagant, and suggestive scene. Something perhaps should be hidden from the children and certainly not included in holy scripture. But there it is. And why do you suppose it is there? Saint John tells us this story of the anointing at Bethany not to titillate us with second hand scandal mongering or inuendo. I think he wants us to consider what we might learn from the scene of compassion, the scene of comparison, and the scene of contrast. So like all good sermons, and most very bad ones, this one has three points. Which I think can be taken from our text. I have saved you all the trouble of trying to figure it out for yourselves, so you'd best listen to what I have to say very carefully. The first thing I think we are meant to take from this is this. Jesus wants us to understand the principle of the big gesture. Jesus wants to understand what it means to make an extravagant gesture when a prudent or a practical or a sensible one would do. This is a lesson about extravagant love. Demonstrative love, love overflowing, love seeping all over the place. What is waste to the eye of the disciples is generosity in the eyes of Jesus. And who are you going to follow? Judas or Jesus. Judas or Jesus. Now I know that question seems self-evident and quite easily answered, but I invite those you of a certain age to remember the famous routine when Jack Benny, notoriously stingy Jack Benny, was accosted by a robber who said to him, "Your money or your life." And there was a long pause and the robber told Jack Benny to hurry up and Jack Benny said, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking." (congregation laughing) Judas's position here makes sense by the way of the world. It is the responsible, the reasonable, the prudent, the methodical thing to do. If you had to choose between flowers on the table and food on the table, most of you would reasonably expected to choose food. And yet, Jesus in another place reminds us that we cannot live by bread alone. There is a time for prudence, but this is not that time. This is not that place. Jesus is against, what I'd like to call, stingy religion. Which means that He will judge most of us very harshly because most of us are inherently stingy. We hold on tightly to what we have, giving as little as possible of our substance and of ourselves. You know exactly what I mean. Why is it that religious people, Christian people, Protestant people, I won't go any further, always have such tight little smiles on their faces. Have you ever noticed? Just look around this congregation, tight little smiles. You can always tell Christians from Jews from Hindus from Muslims because Christians generally have tight little smiles. They don't want to give too much away. They don't want to be caught out, suppose they laugh at the wrong time and it isn't funny. Suppose they give their hand to the wrong person. Suppose they give their heart to the wrong idea. Suppose they're sitting in the wrong pew, in the wrong church at the right time. So you hold something back. Tight little smiles, clammy little handshakes. That is American Christianity every Sunday of the year. Surely not here in this most extravagant of all places, but trust me, everywhere else that is the way it is.

(audience laughing) So why is it that we look and act so gloomy? We are given what is called the gospel, the Good News, and most people think of it as an insurance policy upon which they will never collect. That

tends to be the flavor of the gospel in most of our churches. If joy, for example, if true genuine joy were a crime, would there be enough to indict any of you here? No wonder when a little boy asked his mother what heaven was like, and she said it was like church, he said he didn't want to go there. (audience laughing) And why should he? I ask you to look to your right, look to your left, would you want to spend eternity with that person? Of course not. From all accounts, I haven't been there, but I've read the stories, from all accounts, heaven is a noisy, extravagant, untidy, wasteful place. Full of extravagance and generosity. Full of gestures of big, big, big love and affection. It is described as the big banquet. Not a stingy little coffee hour, but a big banquet.

(audience laughing) The great party, music all day and all night. Now that may disappoint some of the more anal compulsives among you. But then you'll be spending your time elsewhere anyway. (audience laughing) So our Lord here commends the big gesture. I think, for example, our Lord would approve of Duke Chapel. This is an extravagant, wasteful place. And I'm amazed that the sensible, practical Methodist instincts at the heart of Duke University would allow such an extravagant place in the middle of so practical a place. Think what you could do if you tore this place down, turned it in for cash, and helped the poor in Durham of whom there are so many. But thank God you didn't do that. You revel in this extravagant gesture because this is a sign of the extravagant love of God. This is not a monument to the wealth of the Dukes. This is a gesture of the extravagance of God and don't you ever forget it. So, Jesus commends the big picture. He would agree with that great theologian Mae West, "Too much of a good thing is terrific." (audience laughing) Would that we all then could find somebody. Would that we could all find somebody that we love so much that we would waste everything we have for that love. When was the last time you were extravagant with somebody you love? So extravagant that it fell over, rolled over, pressed down, running on the ground. Go on, be extravagant, be wasteful for Christ's sake! Be wasteful with what God has given you. Don't sit there counting your interest, madam, sir. Give it up! For Christ's sake. That's the first thing I think we're to remember. The second thing is (audience laughing) This story is not just about waste, despite the title of my sermon. Nor is it just about extravagance. Nor is it just merely about the big picture. Jesus tells us that we should remember Mary's extravagance because she had done the right thing. She knew the priority of the moment. We remember Mary because she remembered what Jesus needed. She, as the old hymn used to say, she gave of her best to the Master. Now think about it. Jesus is the go-to guy for all the things we want, it is Jesus's job to give, give, give, give, give, give, give. Where in the gospel is it that we see anybody giving Jesus anything? There are the wise men who gave Him gifts at His birth. There is Mary who gives Him this extravagant gesture on the way to the cross. And there are those people who offer Him in mock compassion the cup of water and the vinegar on the cross. Jesus appreciates Mary and therefore commends her to us because she gives it all up for Him. She gives Him everything that she has. She risks everything by giving everything and she does that because she knows it is a precious, vital moment that will not endure forever. Jesus says as much. "The poor you will always have with you. "You will always have opportunity to do good for the poor "because the poor will always be here "to have good done for them." So don't use that as an excuse here. The poor will always need our help, but Jesus, in this case, His time on earth is short, Mary by her gesture recognizes that. She knows that unlike the poor, she will not always have Jesus sitting at her table. This is a sign of His coming death. Anointing is what you do to people who are about to die. You prepare them for the long journey. And of all the people in that room, of all the people at that dinner party, Mary alone seems to be the only one who understands that Jesus is on His way to His death. And He appreciates that. I've learned something in my ministry of Mary's special role in dealing with the dying. First,

like friends and families, I tried to minimize and to maintain the culture of denial when we are standing at death's door with a friend. You'll be okay, you'll get through this thing, we'll beat this thing. But sometimes the best thing you can do for the one who is to die is to acknowledge that, not deny that fact. I attended many years ago a dying friend, my closest friend, who while not a believer, said to me, "If I am going to die, I want to know. "Otherwise I won't know how to behave." And it fell to me as his friend to tell him the truth. To tell him the truth that his family and his doctors could not bear to share with him. And he thanked me for that service. And the time that we shared as the end drew near was all the more precious because he knew, I knew, he knew I knew he was dying. That is what is going on in this story. Learn and listen carefully. And that is why we read this lesson on the fifth Sunday in Lent, with Good Friday nearer now than ever before. Mary got it right. She understood how precious and how few are the days left remaining to Jesus. She understood that, she got it right. And that is why our Lord commends her to us. Well the third thing we're meant to learn from this, I think, is a slight twist on the story. Sure, Mary is the big deal here, I don't want to take anything away from Mary. And Judas has the big part of the villain, let us not take any part from him as well. Her extravagant, extraordinary gesture, the waste as it were, is our subject, really first and really finally and fully. But, like all of the gospel, this is about what Jesus does. And what does He do here in the story? He teaches us how to be generous receivers. Generous receivers. You all are exhorted all of your life by the likes of me and Dean Willimon and otherwise to be generous givers. We're always telling you to give this and give that and give some more. And that's the easy part for most of you because most of you have more than you deserve and you can certainly part with what you've got. The great question for Christians is, how to be generous receivers of what it is God means to give us. Jesus models that behavior in this story. He accepts her gesture. He accepts what she has to offer. He accepts the giver and He accepts the gift. And that is what it is all about. When I was a very young man I took a job teaching at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. I had been recently ordained and I had come from Harvard Divinity School to offer all of my talents to the poor benighted people of the South. How fortunate they were to have me in their midst. And I would go out into the little country churches around Tuskegee in the afternoon, supply preaching in these tiny, little Black Baptist tabernacles tucked into the clay of Macon County, Alabama. And one particular Sunday after I had given the best that I could, they did this thing which I had never seen before, certainly not in the North, they took up a love offering. They went among the people, maybe 40 or 50 of them, and they put their change and their dollar bills and whatnot into the plate. And then in this most unseemly display, which I later discovered is quite normal, they counted it right there on the communion table. They stacked up the nickels and the dimes and the quarters. They rolled the pennies and they put the bills into a package and they put it all together and they gave it to me as the visiting preacher. And I refused it. I said, oh, no, no, no, no. This is such a poor congregation, such a small church, it's my gift to you. Let me give to you, you can't give to me, and I refused their gift. And I went back so full of the Holy Spirit and pleased with myself and I told a wonderful, old lady at Tuskegee, Hattie Mae West Kelly, of the experience and what I had done and I expected her to thank me and praise me for my act of forbearance and charity. And she said, "Young man, you have a lot to learn." I sat back a little bit and she said, "And one of them is, "you must learn to be a generous receiver. "They gave you not just money, but themselves. "And in refusing the money, you refused them. "You must learn how to be a generous receiver." That perhaps is the most important lesson in this gospel narrative today. That Jesus was a generous recipient of this extraordinary and unsolicited gesture on the part of this woman, Mary. It's a parable for us all. Not long after Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed, we held a memorial service in the chapel at Harvard and were privileged to have his father, Martin Luther King,

Sr., preach on the occasion. You can imagine the emotional energy on that occasion. And as old Daddy King rose in the pulpit of the university church, hundreds and hundreds of people stood on their feet and gave this incredible standing ovation. Daddy King kept trying to calm the crowd and the more he tried to calm them, the more this applause came forward and finally he managed to get a word in edgewise and this is what he said. "I don't deserve it, but I can't refuse it. "I know this applause is not for me, it is for my boy. "But I can't refuse it. "I don't deserve it, but I can't refuse it." For us it is the lesson to learn how to receive what it is that God so generously, so graciously, so lavishly, so extravagantly, gives us. And our message is, don't waste the gift of His love. For He does not regard it as waste who pours it upon us so abundantly. He who gave Himself a ransom for us. His life for our lives. Learn to be generous receivers. We don't deserve it. But we can't refuse it. Let us pray. Oh, God who has prepared for them that love Thee such good things as pass our understanding, pour into our hearts such love towards Thee that we, loving Thee above all things, may obtain Thy promises, which exceed all that we can imagine or desire. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. (light instrumental music)