**SCENT OF A WASTEFUL WOMAN**

March 13, 2016

5th Sunday of Lent

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8



Finding yourself desperately in need of the *latest* accessories for the Christian lifestyle? Who knew that there was actually an International Christian Retail Show, a gathering for those businesses and churches who sell distinctive Christian oriented merchandise. Some of them are bookstores of various types who want to carry these lifestyle accessories.

There are Testamints. These are mints individually wrapped within copies of the most quotable Bible verses. You can grasp the sword of the Spirit in your personal battle against evil halitosis and you can have great breath while sharing the gospel with others.

Many in our congregation, especially parents and grandparents of young children have plunked in a CD that tells a Veggie Tales story of Tom the Tomato and Larry the cucumber. But there are also Veggie Tales puppets, games, and Halloween costumes. Instead of Fruit of the Loom underwear there is Fruit of the Spirit underwear and tote bags. There is the Evangecube – a Rubik’s cube-like device with Biblical words and verses to match.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But some of these are really *yesterday’s* Christian lifestyle accessories. Every year brings something new and the old can quickly become passé in today’s burgeoning Christian merchandise demand, which at last count totaled $4.3 billion in annual sales! At a more recent retailers’ convention, eyebrows were raised in anticipation over the riveting *new* ways that believers could manifest Christ.

Consider Gospel Golf Balls. What better conversation starter in the tee box than a portion of Scripture emblazoned across your ball. Dave Kruse, president of the company teaming with Top Flight to produce the balls, added a welcome word for Christian duffers. They no longer need to be frustrated when losing a sliced ball into the rough, because who knows what pagan may find your ball later on. “If you’re spraying the ball, well … lose a golf ball, share the gospel.”  I once was lost, but now I’m found.

It’s hard not to turn away from the display of Jesus Junk. It’s like the accident on the side of the thruway; you don’t want to look as you drive by … and yet you can’t help looking. Well then, consider this product as the capstone of the new list of lifestyle accessories available for Christian consumption — Virtuous Woman, a Christian perfume line.

Virtuous Woman perfume comes packaged with a passage in Proverbs 31 from which it borrows its tagline: “Virtuous Woman … her worth is far above rubies.” Its Web site claims that it is “a fragrance experience that engages body, mind and spirit.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Is it possible that one’s perfume can express spirituality? Retailer Milton Hobbs claims that what makes his floral fragrance distinctly Christian is that it can be an evangelistic tool. “It should be enticing enough to provoke questions: ‘What’s that you’re wearing?’ Then you take that opportunity to speak of your faith.

There is no reason to doubt Hobbs’ sincerity. But aren’t there already well-known perfumes a woman can wear with which to bait and switch a conversation from fragrance to faith?

“That smells lovely — what are you wearing?”

“It’s Obsession by Calvin Klein — but I’m really obsessed with Jesus.”

Or, “It’s Eternity — do you know where you are going when you die?”

Or, “It’s Romance by Ralph Lauren — because God so *loved* the world …”

Okay — perhaps we’ve gone a bit too far. But ironically, this concept of a Christian fragrance is found in scripture.

“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:15).

Granted, it has taken too much time to get to this text, but our gospel passage gives us a tangible image of what being Christ’s aroma might look like through the example of Jesus and the “scent of a wasteful woman,” a title filched from the 1992 film starring Al Pacino and Chris O’Donnell that made an impact on me, especially that scene where Col. Frank Slade, who is blind can not only smell a woman’s perfume, but drive a Ferrari through the city when his front seat passenger tells him when and how to turn.

Many of you are familiar with the sketchy details of the story in John 12 where Mary demonstrates lavish worship by anointing Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume. It is a part of the lectionary’s Lenten reading schedule used by churches throughout the world for the 5th Sunday of Lent this year. What are we to make of this?

Last week, if we had spent more time in the gospel we would have been focused on the account of the prodigal son. Prodigal by the way means “wasteful.” Every time I have read that account and considered what was happening through the eyes of the older brother, I have thought that it was really the Father who would have appeared to be wasteful. As I reread last week’s gospel, it occurred to me that wastefulness pops out of this week’s text, too. How might we examine a few of the normally overlooked details of these few verses to find some Lenten reflection for this morning, when most aren’t thinking about having it lighter later, but at this hour are yearning for a little more shut-eye.

**Jesus was Different.** When Jesus arrived in Bethany (12:1), the region was gushing with heightened interest in the one who had just raised one of their own from the dead. Faithful Jews (12:9) and even non-Jews (12:20) were curiously seeking to know more of this rabbi.

Quite a few years ago now, Gerry Mello (who is with us in worship this morning), Martha and I stopped at the tomb of Lazarus. Nearby was the house of a woman who offered to give you a tour of her Palestinian home for a dollar or two. By the way, we later saw her climb into her BMW. Our guide told us that she was now headed to her actual home, that her peasant looking clothes were really her costume, that she had paid a premium price for this traditional holy site of Jesus’ miracle and that the house was actually her business.

Then, our guide led us into the tomb. It was not damp as we supposed, but dry and musty, the traditional site of where Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus. If you recall Jesus was at first berated for having taken so long to get to Bethany with the complaint that if he had arrived sooner, Lazarus would not have died. Then he asked to have the stone from the tomb removed, and the family and friends were hesitant to do that because they believed that the odor of decaying Lazarus would be too offensive. But then, Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus.

Jesus clearly had a reputation – an aroma that people already knew. I’ve thought about that 2 Corinthians verse, “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:15) and when thinking about it wondered, “Do those around *us* know there is something different about us? Does our life make them curious as to what, or Who, lurks in our distinctiveness? Do they *inquire* about that difference?” Usually I would much rather blend in to the background. But it is probably worth some self-interrogation, “Do our lifestyles and words and un-random acts of kindness display some difference to the more commonly expected behaviors?

**Jesus was not only different but Intentional.** It was also six days before the Passover (12:1) according to our reading. It is at the beginning of this last week of Christ’s life. Jesus had little time left to lead and have an impact on his followers. He captured most *every* fleeting opportunity to demonstrate the nature of the kingdom he hoped to bring.

Martha was serving a meal (at least she’s consistent) and the recently dead Lazarus dined with Jesus at the table. This is a funny time for a kingdom lesson — but dead trees, drawing water from a well, a storm in a boat — these were the common-fare things that Jesus encountered which quickly became his teaching devices. Notice that here, as elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus does not bait and switch people with any fragrance-to-faith tactics.

He does, however, *intentionally* take an opportunity to utilize any spiritual conversation starter that presents itself. A meal interrupted by a worship event is a chance to communicate his coming passion to the curious assembly (v. 8).

Jesus’ example gives us insight into the lens through which he observed our world. God is working *all things* together for good and for God’s plan (Romans 8:28). “All things” in Greek means “all things” and includes our even non-Christian friends. We don’t need cleverly perfumed evangelism tools to share God with people. We only need to be more like Christ — looking for everyday opportunities to speak of who God is and how God may be at work in the lives of the curious crowds.

Evangelism is like sonar. Where we see people’s lives blip and overlap with kingdom values, we may find ourselves in a place to take conversational risk to help connect the dots. People who recycle are reflecting God’s value for creation. People who grieve catastrophes intuit that this world is still broken and in need of fixing. People who complain about Christian hypocrisy are actually sharing common ground with Jesus.

Every one of us is imperfect. But as we bump along the road, we might ask ourselves how we being the aroma of Christ by intentionally looking for everyday object lessons through which we can speak of the kingdom to the curious, our families, and our encounters in the mall.

**Jesus was different, intentional and Jesus faced an honored cost**. The author of this gospel, John gives us deliberate details of this dinner, especially when he demonstrates the humble and extravagant cost for Mary was to be her act of worship. It was pure nard she was about to pour out, then she would convert her own hair into a servant’s foot towel. Judas objected about the ridiculous expense and tells us that the value of the perfume was a year’s wages. What is that? $25,000, $50,000, $150,000? Would *you* spend that kind of money on a bottle of perfume and dump it out on someone’s feet? Even the people watching this extravagance thought she was nuts!

John wants us to know that there is huge cost and sacrifice for Mary. How beautiful an aroma before God this extravagant scent of Mary’s sacrifice must have been! We know how passionate Jesus was for the cause of the poor and marginalized, and yet he honors the cost of Mary’s sacrifice for him.

This part of the story has always bothered me. There are so many ways that I think that Judas Iscariot was right in declaring “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” The gospel writer does give us the aside that Judas really didn’t care so much about the poor, but that rather he was a thief who used to steal from the common purse of the apostles. Of course, we are really caught off guard by Jesus honoring of Mary. With the scent of this seemingly wasteful woman’s act filling the room, he said, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Surely it was a verse like this that caused people in Europe centuries ago to make such incredible sacrifices and build those magnificent cathedrals! I have stood inside of them and marveled at the stonework, the stained glass, the vaulted ceilings, the delicately carved but massive altars and thought, as a smug reformed theologian, “Would it not have been better to have spent the resources used to build this edifice on people rather than this structure? Doesn’t the New Testament teach that the church is not a building, but a people? Don’t we see that in the photographs that hang in our fellowship hall?

Somehow, God always provides a challenge to our thinking. Just when we think we have it all figured out, God has a different word. It was about this time of year that Curt Herge and I made a trip to New York City to meet Monsignor Richard Albert. He made an annual pilgrimage to the big apple. Why? Because he was head of the St. Patrick’s Foundation in Jamaica, a mission that tried to reach the poor children of Riverton. The foundation ran schools in a country that doesn’t see the separation of church and state quite like we do.

The Jamaican government was glad to have the church providing education for the children in a place where the government itself didn’t have the resources, and so the St. Patrick’s foundation built schools, received some aid from the federal government and taught basic skills and faith to the children. We had hatched a plan to build a gymnasium for one of the schools.

Monsignor Albert came to New York every St. Patrick’s Day and regularly came to St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Where else might you want to raise money for the St. Patrick’s Foundation than at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Our plan was to stay at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey and take the train into the city. We wanted to be good stewards of our limited funds and it seemed cheaper to spend a night at the continuing education center and park our car there for free, and take the train into Manhattan.

Monsignor Albert suggested we meet at St. Monica’s. The Gothic Revival Church was erected in 1906 and then a 3 story convent built at 405-413 East 79th street on Manhattan’s upper East Side. The school operated by the church had closed, but we were to meet at the rectory and convent. It was there that the plans for what has become JASY took place. Dr. Richard Albert died this past year and David McEneany who has been a part of our JASY mission from its beginning went to the memorial service in Jamaica.

Monsignor Albert thanked us for the offer to assist the foundation by building a gym for one of the schools and maybe a playground and other classrooms, but he told us that he would prefer if we could develop a program that would bring our youth to Jamaica to work with Jamaican youth rather than a building. Back in Pittsford, we knew that this might be a tough sell, we were more used to mission trips that dealt with bricks and mortar projects. Wouldn’t we be wasting a lot of time and money to take our children to Jamaica.

We knew what many in Pittsford could not initially perceive. All of Jamaica is not the beaches and resorts of Ocho Rios. It is not all clubs and cabanas in Montego Bay. The vast majority of the island is mountainous, rural and poor. There are the outskirts of Kingston where family incomes are closer to $1,000 per year. That is where we would go. That is where the children of Pittsford would go. Wouldn’t it be wasteful even to have them raise the money for the airfare? Would it not be better to just send the funds to the St. Patrick’s Foundation? Monsignor Richard Albert told us, “Absolutely not! If you do that you will not have the opportunity to touch the hands and hearts of our children, or they the hands and hearts of yours. I know that it seems wasteful. But, consider the lives that were changed by extravagant wastefulness of Mary.”

It seemed almost wasteful to come all the way from Pittsford to Manhattan without going to St. Patrick’s Cathedral. We stood on the front steps, the mass was almost ending and we would then go into the church more as tourists. While standing there a man pulled a small cart, one that I had seen many women in the city use to drag a few days’ groceries home to their apartment. We had scarcely any eye contact. He didn’t want to make it and with his head humbly down asked if we might watch his cart while he went into the church for a few minutes. We peered into it. It had a blanket, some clothes, an extra pair of shoes and some food. We weren’t sure that else, but said that yes, we could watch it for about 10 or 15 minutes or so.

He went into the church and came out about 10 minutes later. This time we had eye contact. He thanked us for watching his cart and then offered that he liked to come to the church every day. He felt closer to God there. “Anyone can go in, you know,” he said. “It doesn’t matter what you have.”

We could see that this was a place that lifted his spirit, and it seemed incredible that his life was brightened so much by this beautiful building, built by love and sacrifice. We walked up the stairs and into the back of the church, people were now gathering for the next service, one that would honor St. Patrick and you could smell the incense floating back from the last mass.”

I had similar thoughts watching the final episode of Downton Abbey. The entire clan of folks, servants who worked below the great house and those who lived lavishly above gathered to celebrate the New Year. Of course there was that magnificently redemptive moment when Thomas Barrow was offered the position of becoming the new butler. I reflected on the scene of Edith’s wedding that also occurred at the village church. Actually throughout the entire series there had been weddings, baptisms, funerals, all of them conducted at that place. It was usually there that the barriers of those who worked as servants and those who were blessed to own the gracious manor came together. It occurred to me that the beautiful place did have a function of bringing folks together.

I think about the smell of that perfume and that wasteful act of a woman. In our own judgmental ways, we righteously condemn the extravagance done by others that might honor God in some special way.

They have built church buildings in which people gather. They have wastefully consumed donuts together, bought each other coffee, made a blanket for a baby they didn’t know. For much of the world, it has been extravagantly wasteful of time and money. But, I think that God has most always smiled and thought, “They are beginning to get the idea of the kingdom I intended and have started to enjoy and help others enjoy the world I have created.

We can leave the Testamints and the scripturally emblazoned golf balls behind, but surely the world will pick up on the scent of the wastefully faithful, the wastefully penitent, and the wastefully loving.

1. Simon, Stephanie. “Christian retailers put their print on products.” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2006. latimes.com/news.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Virtuous Woman perfume. nhimco.com/virtuous.html.
 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)