

Lately I've been infected with something that usually gets me about this time each year, and it inspires me do something I don't normally do. I've been infected by spring cleaning—tossing out things I no longer need, some of which I haven't used for many years. I've been going through items at home, and the spring cleaning has even entered my office here at church. This week I took out several boxes of unneeded paper for recycling, and I hauled trash cans full of items to the dumpster. As I've sorted through the items, I wondered why I've kept things for so long. It seems like such a waste to allow things to accumulate and take up space.

While cleaning I came across an article from 2009 that illustrates how we Americans throw away a lot of waste. Photographer Chris Jordan "uses exquisite images to show the ... the 1 million plastic cups distributed on US airline flights every 6 hours, or the 2 million plastic beverage bottles we run through every 5 minutes, or the 426,000 cell phones we discard every day, or the 1.14 million brown paper supermarket bags we

- 1 million plastic cups on US airline flights every 6 hours
- 2 million plastic bottles every 5 minutes
- 426,000 cell phones discarded every day
- 1.14 million brown paper bags each hour
- 60,000 plastic bags every 5 seconds
- 15 million sheets of paper every 5 minutes
- 170,000 batteries produced every 15 minutes

use each hour, or the 60,000 plastic bags we use every 5 seconds, or the 15 million sheets of office paper we use every 5 minutes, or the 170,000 Energizer batteries produced every 15 minutes."¹

Here's an example of a photo of a lovely scene of people strolling in the park. The scene is 5 feet tall by 8 feet side. If you



zoom in on the photo to look up close, you will discover that it's created from tiny images of 106 thousand aluminum cans representing the amount of cans we toss every 30 seconds.²

That's a lot of wastefulness, which has been an issue that we humans have always struggled with, but the issue seems even more critical today. The disciples of Jesus may have never envisioned our magnitude of wastefulness, but at least one of the disciples was concerned about the issue, although in a different manner.

Jesus had gone to visit the home of Lazarus where Martha prepared him a wonderful meal while, as Luke's Gospel tells us (10:38-43), her sister Mary

sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him teach. John's version adds a bit more to the story by explaining that Mary poured on Jesus' feet³ a costly jar of perfume, worth 300 pieces of silver, which some scholars suggest was the equivalent wages that a day laborer could earn in a year. Jesus' disciple Judas exclaimed, "Wouldn't it have been less wasteful to have sold the perfume and used that money to help the poor?"

Jesus quickly came to Mary's defense, suggesting that she was using the perfume to prepare his body for burial, which I imagine those listening might have found a strange answer. *Burial? What do you mean, Jesus? You can't die now! What a waste that would be. You've just started this movement that's changing people's lives. The crowds enjoy your stories. We've learned so much from you. Why speak about death? How wasteful that would be!*

It would have been a common sign of respect at that time to pour a few drops of oil on someone's head; more amounts



of oil poured on the head affirmed one as the anointed one, as one chosen by God, and was considered a sacred act. But oil on the feet? That would have been seen as an odd thing to do. The closest tradition was the act of washing a guest's feet after traveling on dusty roads, but that would have been done with water, not oil. This action by Mary seemed so out of place, but Jesus' response affirmed her action anyway.

Another version of this story exists in Matthew's Gospel, where an unnamed woman anoints Jesus. In this story, Judas once again complains about the wastefulness of the woman, and after Jesus explained that she was anointing his body for burial, Judas went to the leaders to see how much money he could make for turning Jesus over to them. It leaves me wondering if Judas caught a glimpse of the larger picture, knowing that no matter what happened to Jesus, that this anointing indicated that Jesus was God's chosen One who would lead them to freedom.

When Judas later realized his action led to Jesus' arrest and preparation for execution, Judas may



have reflected, *What a waste. I spent three years with this guy, and where did it get us? I thought by turning him in he would finally usher in his kingdom and make the world right. But it appears all I accomplished was getting him captured. I don't see a way out now. The thirty pieces of silver can never compensate for the damage I've done. What wastefulness!*

Those reflecting on this terrible situation that seemed without hope may have recalled the story of their people 500 years before who seemed to have no hope when they were forcibly carried from their homes into Exile. Psalm 126 offers a glimpse of their memories of this event when they finally returned home:

It seemed like a dream, too good to be true,
when GOD returned Zion's exiles.
We laughed, we sang,
we couldn't believe our good fortune.
We were the talk of the nations—
"GOD was wonderful to them!"

GOD *was* wonderful to us;
we are one happy people.⁴

And yet, even while singing this psalm celebrating their return, they were lamenting the lack of rain, hoping that their drought-filled lives would be replenished. It would be tempting to complain, *What a waste. We finally get freedom from our foreign oppressors only to find ourselves without water. What wastefulness!*



And yet, they remembered their joy and laughter, joyfulness that may have seemed like wasteful celebration in their present situation.

I've learned through the years that sometimes in those times that seem all dried up, that seem drought-filled and without hope, that God offers a glimpse of laughter. In those times when death and staleness seem to lie just around the corner, God offers joyful scents of perfumed fragrance. It may seem wasteful to hope in the face of drought or staleness, but God somehow offers joyful scents of laughter.

I know it's easier to be critical of another's generosity, seeing their acts as wasteful, which may have been in the case of one person who

always stopped at the pretzel

stand outside his workplace, placed \$2 on the counter, but

didn't take a pretzel. One day, the stand operator said, "I've got something I'd like to say to you."



"Oh, I know," the fellow says, "You want to know why I put down \$2 every day and don't take a pretzel, don't you? You think I'm wasteful?"

"No," said the vendor, "I just wanted to tell you they've gone up to \$2.50."⁵

I think the Gospel writers preserved the story of the woman generously anointing Jesus' feet to remind us that even when you and I struggle with the difficulties of life, when we make more trips to see the doctor than we ever imagined we would, or when the economy still seems to work against us, or when



those we love seem harsh or uncaring, that even in those difficult times, in those times that appear wasteful, God offers a scent of laughter, a glimmer of hope. As we continue on our journey toward Easter, we know that some days will be filled with trouble, and yet, we know that hoping is not wasteful, for God has a surprising fragrance of joy just around the corner.

¹Bill McKibben, "Waste Not, Want Not," www.motherjones.com/environment/2009/05/waste-not-want-not

² See artwork at www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/rtn/#caps-seurat

³ See artwork at www.heqigallery.com

⁴ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language* (Ps 126:1-3). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress. Psalm 126:1-3

⁵ www.homileticsonline.com