“Why this waste?” This question, while not worded this way in our reading from John’s Gospel, is found in Mark and Matthew’s telling of much the same story. Indeed, this story is one of the very few that is found in ALL of the Gospels, with some variations—highlighting its importance for early Christians. In Mark and Matthew, it is the disciples who ask the question. John puts a similar question in Judas’ mouth, along with the parenthetical comments about Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, and that he was an embezzler. Regardless, however, of who asks the question, there is an underlying concern: this money represented by this action could have been put to better use. And that concern implies a couple of related issues. The first is that such an extravagant action on Mary’s part just doesn’t make sense. And the second “is like unto it”: there is a question of “stewardship”.

“If it just doesn’t make sense!” is a sentiment at the base of the Gospel story this morning, and I’ll return to that a bit later. But, in many ways, it’s found throughout Scripture. Recall that Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth that:

[T]he message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. . . . [W]e proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles . . . . God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength (1.18-25).

And he goes on:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all . . . . We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless . . . . We have
become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day (4.9-13).

In short, being a Christian doesn’t make sense!

Then, consider what Paul later wrote to the Christians at Philippi. We just heard him recite his resumé!

- circumcised on the eighth day (that is, not a late-comer to Judaism)
- member of the people of Israel (not grafted in)
- of the tribe of Benjamin (source of Israel’s first king; loyal to Judah)
- Hebrew born of Hebrews (not a proselyte or convert)
- as to the law, a Pharisee (an expert, not like the other, false, “apostles”)
- as to zeal, a persecutor of the church (that is, VERY zealous!)
- as to righteousness under the law, blameless (better than those who would champion the Law rather than faith)

Given those qualifications, what synagogue, or church, wouldn’t hire him. But, in his case, there was no question of being over-, or under-, qualified. On the contrary, he asserted that the “job description” the Philippians had developed was poorly written. While he could bring those assets to the position, as a Christian, it was more important to set them aside, to count them as no better than “dung” (the Greek, σκύβαλα (skúbala), has an ickier sound and meaning than “rubbish”!). He claims that he can’t imagine putting those considerations ahead of his desire to “know Christ . . . the power of his resurrection . . . sharing [in] his sufferings by becoming like him in his death”, and thus, “somehow . . . [attaining] the resurrection from the dead” (3.10-11). In other words, turning the idea on its head, to rely on human standards of “success” just “doesn’t make sense!”

As I was considering this passage from Paul, I recalled a book from my early graduate student days: E. R. Dodds’ Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety (New York: Norton, 1965). In this book, Dodds examined the personal religious attitudes and experiences common to pagans and Christians in the period between between the middle of the 2nd century after Christ and the beginning of the 4th century. He discussed world-hatred and asceticism, dreams and states of possession, and pagan and Christian mysticism, and overall uncertainty about the future—all characteristics of what he termed the “age of anxiety” (which also sounds a lot like today!). He pointed out that there wasn’t a heck of a lot of difference between the answers put
forward by the two groups; indeed, there was a lot of overlap. But, he argued, one big point-of-departure throughout those centuries was the major social emphasis on λογίσμος (logismos)—logic or reason. In the hierarchy of “knowledge”, λογίσμος was at the top and πίστις (pistis)—faith in the unseen—was at the bottom. That is, those people who simply “believed” without logic, without reason, without evidence, were . . . . to put it mildly, “simpletons”. In other words, all of Paul’s emphasis on “foolishness” and “faith”, as opposed to “wisdom”, put him at the bottom of the intellectual heap, and he knew it. For someone with his pedigree, this just “didn’t make sense”. But, for him, that was the point.

To the disciples, Mary’s action of pouring a years’-wages-worth of perfume all over Jesus’ feet didn’t make sense either. Clearly the disciples (regardless of any ulterior motives on Judas’ part) saw Mary at the bottom of the intellectual—not to mention fiscally responsible—heap. And, I would imagine that most of us would be in their camp. I mean, this was an argument about prudent use of resources! That’s a discussion we have as tax-payers! That’s our discussion as we consider our stewardship and the church’s budget: what is the most prudent use of our resources?

Jesus’ response to the disciples in all of the Gospels is that Mary’s action was commendable, NOT foolish. In Mark (14.6) and Matthew (26.10), Jesus tells his disciples that “she has performed a good service for me.” And, that “good service”, in all of the accounts was that, “She [was] anticipating and honoring the day of [Jesus’] burial” (Jn 12.7, The Message). In other words, when it came to honoring Jesus, “making sense” isn’t at the top of the hierarchy. To Jesus’ true disciples, expressions of awe and wonder—potentially “foolish” expressions—reign supreme. Or, to put a different “spin” on it, extravagant giving is not a matter of justified-expenditure, but, rather, an overflow of gratitude.

Not making sense, more often than not, is characteristic of the stories of scripture. But that isn’t their point, despite those who would try to turn sacred accounts into science text-books. What kind of “sense” is found in a God who “makes a road in the desert and rivers in wastelands” (Is 43.18)? Who claims that “wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches” (Is 43.19)? Who “sent his Son into the world, not to condemn it, but that it might have life” (Jn 3.16)? The stories of scripture are meant to draw us out of a logic-based, results-based, world-view, and into one with extravagant, boundless, love at its base.

It was that “extravagant, boundless love” that was behind God’s “senseless” action of “restoring the fortunes of Zion”, as we heard in Psalm 126. What else could explain the restoration-from-exile of a people who had forsaken, over and over again,
the very God who was then returning them to their homeland? It was an unimaginable dream come true. It didn’t make sense that those, who went out weeping would return with joy. But that is the nature of the God we worship. “The Lord has done great things for us—not just the returning exiles—and we are glad indeed” (126.4).

As I close, I want to return to Dodds’ *Pagan and Christian*. An underlying question of his book was “Why did Christianity succeed while the paganism of that time faded away?”. He concluded that Christianity succeeded not for any “logical” reason; that is, Christianity didn’t thrive because it was “smarter” than paganism. No, we are here today because early Christians recognized that it was in their common life together, their mutual support and care, that “success” was found. That was not an expected answer, and, in the worldview of its day, it didn’t make sense. In antiquity, just as today, there was a lot of “sensible” self-interest. But a deeper, underlying, need for community then, as now, was more compelling than “going it alone”.

In a couple of weeks, in the eyes of many in the world, we, as a community, will do something that doesn’t make sense: we’ll celebrate again that annual recognition of God’s “extravagant, boundless love” for humanity, of God’s taking action on our behalf. I mean, really, who are we—wayward, self-centered, sinful people—that, on our behalf, “the Lord would take frail flesh and die” (Hymn 358, v. 1)? We’ll “spend” a lot of time and resources to celebrate Holy Week and Easter, not because of any “efficiency” (although there may be people who think that such an extravaganza may bring in people and impress them), but because we love the Lord who first loved us. It doesn’t make sense—neither God’s action on our behalf, nor our response to that action. But that’s not the point.

The point is that God was, and is, doing something new with God’s people, people who senselessly care for each other. We may not perceive it. It may not make sense. But it is our way forward!

Amen.