

Fifth Weekend in Lent (RCL/C): "Devotion and a Dinner Party"

John 12:1-8

April 6-7, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Not that there has to be an excuse for a party... but what's the **occasion** of the party in today's Gospel? It's a "thank you" dinner for Jesus and a "welcome home" dinner for Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

- Who
- What
- When
- Where
- Why

These are the 5 "W's" I learned to include in a news story when I took a journalism class in grammar school **years** ago. So let's find the answer to all those questions in today's Gospel, a very important one, a stepping stone on our way to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter.

**Who** are the characters in this story, other than Jesus and Lazarus, whom we've already named?

- Martha
- Mary
- Judas
- Other disciples? (*Martha served, and Lazarus was **one** of those at the table with him.* John 12:2b If Judas was present, the other apostles probably were, too.)

**What** is happening? We already know there was a dinner party. But what else?

- Mary anoints, massages Jesus' feet with perfume and wipes them with her hair.
- Judas criticizes Mary for spending money foolishly when people are starving.
- Jesus sticks up for her: "*Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*" (John 12:7-8)

**When** is all this taking place? *Six days before the Passover....* (John 12:1) In this Fourth Gospel, Jesus dies on the cross as the Passover lambs are being ritually slaughtered in the Temple. Bottom line: this party is the weekend before He dies – and just before His triumphal entry into the city, which we’ll remember next weekend, Palm Sunday.

**Where** is the story taking place? In *...Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.* (John 12:1)

So that brings us back to the **Why** where we started: the party in today’s Gospel is a “thank you” dinner for Jesus and a “welcome home” celebration for Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. The party planners were certainly Lazarus’ sisters, Martha & Mary. At Soup & Scripture, this coming Wednesday, 12 noon at Manasquan Pres., I’ll be talking more about Martha & Mary, using St. Luke’s story about them hosting Jesus another time (Luke 10:38-42). You probably remember it: Martha is **very** busy getting the meal ready and is aggravated that Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to Him instead of helping her sister. (There’s some very interesting artwork of that scene!) Martha asks Jesus to redirect Mary to the kitchen. We can imagine Jesus shaking His head ☺ as He says:

*“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things: [“Martha, dear Martha, you’re fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing” The Message] there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.”* (Luke 10:41-42)

It’s not surprising, then, that in today’s Gospel “Martha was serving.” It’s also not surprising that Mary is the one performing the act of loving, lavish, intimate devotion, anointing, massaging Jesus’ feet with very expensive, beautifully fragrant perfume.

This scene is a study in paradox. On one hand, its context is death: Lazarus’ death beforehand and Jesus’ death afterwards (which St. John says was hastened by Jesus’ raising of Lazarus). On the other hand, it’s a symphony of resurrection notes: Jesus has brought Lazarus

back from the dead and God will raise Jesus again on the third day. It's a beautiful detail St. John gives us, that after Mary anoints Jesus' feet:

*The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume.* (John 12:3b)

If we scroll back in time, we might remember that when Jesus stood outside Lazarus' tomb and ordered the stone to be moved, ever-practical Martha was alarmed and protested:

*"Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."* (John 11:39c)

The stink of death is gone and the smell of pure nard is now the fragrance of resurrection in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, as surely as if lilies bloomed in every corner.

Looking on was Judas, who knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. St. John uses this opportunity to call him out as a thief: *kleptes* (as in kleptomania). The same word is used in John, chapter 10, when Jesus calls Himself the good shepherd, and says:

*"The thief comes only to kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* (John 10:10-11)

Jesus' washing of His disciples' feet the night before He dies foreshadows His complete gift of self and life on the cross. He wipes the disciples' feet with a towel (John 13:5); Mary wipes His feet with her hair. It's an almost embarrassingly intimate detail. Mary's action is charged with loving, grateful devotion. This whole story is sensual: the fragrance and silky feel of the perfume, the inviting food and drink that must have been on the table -- then the coarse sound of Judas' criticism and the music of Jesus' firm rebuttal, as He affirms Mary's choices once again:

*"Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."*  
(John 12:7-8a)

A part of me asks **why** St. John had to "mar" the story of Mary's devotion by mentioning Judas' hypocritical concern that the money would have been better spent helping the poor than splurging on expensive perfume. Maybe the simplest answer is that St. John wants to be sure we connect the

dots between the dinner in Bethany and the crucifixion on Calvary. Mary is anointing the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah, the King, who will be nailed to a cross under a sign that will read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The cross is His throne as surely as a manger once was. He will be glorified as much in crucifixion as in resurrection.

But maybe there's another reason the presence of Judas blights this otherwise beautiful story. Perhaps we need to be reminded that whole-hearted, radical devotion to our Lord will sometimes be met with criticism. Mary was coloring way outside the lines by letting her hair hang free, getting on her knees, anointing the Lord's feet, wiping them with her hair. Sometimes there's a bias against pure worship. "Be of some **earthly** good, for heaven's sake! Invest your time and energy and money in helping your neighbor!" But if we're in **intimate relationship** with the One who commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we need to **express** our love for Him, our praise of Him, our thanksgiving to Him for being our Savior. We need to spend time with the Beloved.

God loves our praise. God loves our music-making. God loves to see God's children gathered near the pulpit to hear the Word and around the Table to eat the Supper. Time in worship is never wasted. The time we dedicate to worship is our version of Mary's tender anointing of the Lord's feet. We receive ever so much more than we give. Worship enlivens us, It propels us through "the servant's entrance" into the world and fuels the practical ministries God also loves and to which He calls us. But our work in the world will suck the life out of us if we aren't regularly refreshed by grace, deriving our strength from on high, not taking the credit for apparent success or sinking into despair in the face of apparent defeat, but acknowledging that the work is God's. We are God's. We are to be faithful. We are to serve in love. It is enough. Amen

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