

**True Service**  
First UMC of Pocatello  
The Second Sunday in Lent  
March 13, 2022

John 12:1-8 (Martha)

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That night, the low-lying table was set with clay pottery worn smooth from years of use and filled with food for the feast: olives and nuts, figs and pomegranates, all brought out from the storeroom; bread cakes freshly baked in the courtyard; pitchers of sweet wine; a large common pot of lentil stew; and roasted meat – a rare treat – reserved for occasions just like this one. As the mealtime approached, final preparations were made. Candles were lit, each place setting was perfectly arranged, washbasins and towels for cleansing hands and feet were set by the entryway. There was a sip of broth followed by a final pinch of spice.

One by one, the people came, washed, and reclined at their places. The steam curling upward from the lamb took on substance in the candlelight. The laughter of children and the patter of animals trickled in through open windows. Someone sang a short hymn of thanksgiving to bless the food. The guest of honor, Jesus of Nazareth, whispered an *Amen* with the others, looked at the spread before him, the friends around him. Through eyes glistening with gratitude, he caught the glance of his host, smiled, bowed his head in thanks, and dug in.

All of this happens before Mary brings in her jar of perfume; all of this is hidden behind those six small words: “they gave a dinner for him.” But as is true of all scripture, every detail swings wide to reveal a world, and you and I know the kind of work involved in hosting a proper feast. *Someone* makes the food and sets the table. *Someone* arranges a space fit, they hope, for the visitation of a holy kind of presence. Here, in John 12, at the home of Lazarus of Bethany, that someone is Martha.

“[T]hey gave a dinner for him. Martha served...” (John 12:2).

That she served is the only thing John says about her, and we can imagine her moving swiftly back and forth between the courtyard kitchen and the dining quarters, keeping the courses coming, the cups full.

Yet she is no stranger to us, for she was a very active character in the story just before this one, when Jesus raised her brother from the dead. When he had first arrived at Bethany, it was Martha who went out to meet him and share the news that Lazarus had already died. It was to Martha that Jesus came close and said, “I am the resurrection and the life,” and Martha who believed that these words of his were true. It was Martha who ran home and sent out her grieving sister, Mary, saying to her, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when Jesus commanded that Lazarus’ tomb be opened, it was Martha who gently cautioned him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” We already know Martha to be a person of initiative, of faith, of directness, honesty, and clear perception. Now, we can add that she has a servant’s heart.

This picture of Martha is regularly overshadowed by the way Luke tells a similar story in his Gospel. According to Luke, when Jesus visited the sisters’ home sometime during his ministry, he discovered a house divided. Martha bustled away, “distracted by her many tasks” (10:40), while Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying” (10:39). Martha came to Jesus and complained that this simply wasn’t fair: Mary had left her to do all the work alone! (You have to laugh at one sibling asking Jesus to rebuke another.) Jesus replied famously, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part...” (10:41-42).

Luke seems to be after a lesson about matters of temporary versus eternal importance, or about how just because someone does lots of stuff *in the vicinity* of God doesn’t mean they’re *communing* with or *enjoying* God. That this has spoken deeply to our distracted and frenzied time is reflected in the fact that many of us have internalized that well-known book title: *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*.

But this is not at all the picture of Martha, or of her relationship with Mary, that John sets before us! No, in his Gospel, Jesus *seeks out* Martha's table at a time of momentous personal anguish and transition, when he is preparing himself to go to Jerusalem and die. And that she serves him, and dedicates her time and energy to putting on this dinner, does not at all come off as the compulsive activity of "a doer."

Instead, serving others is her grateful response to the experience of God's love and power in her life. Jesus came to her when she sent for him, and he raised her brother from the dead. Jesus restored joy and fellowship to *her table*! Could there be a more fitting response than for her to open her door and welcome him in to recline at that very table, to show him and offer back to him the very gifts he gave her – fellowship, laughter, a hopeful home? Through her service, I daresay that she touches on God's greatest desire, which is to be willingly welcomed home into the world that God has made and redeemed, to be directed to a seat at the center of every home and heart.

"There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served..."

It is no small thing. It is ordinary, material, daily work given to God as an offering.

But wait. Isn't that what Mary gave – an offering? *She's* the one pouring out her pound of pure nard in an extravagant, irrecoverable, and thus beautiful sacrifice. Isn't it *her* act – criticized by Judas, blessed by Jesus – that takes center stage in this story?

It is. *But only because there is first a stage for it.*

There is a mood, you see, a setting, a context for the gift of the heart: Martha's home; Martha's table; the meal that Martha serves. Even today, we celebrate and feast as a way of holding many of our most precious moments. The "point" of our gathering may be the speech, the ceremony, the vows, the Happy Birthday song, but it's the table, the fellowship, the thoughtful and abundant provision of care, which soften the heart and give those moments their full impact.

To have come from no atmosphere at all into the intense, overpowering fragrance of Mary's perfume would have been too incongruous, too abrupt to be appreciated. But to have been already pleasantly enveloped in the aroma of Martha's meal, to have the aroma of the broth and the bread and the dripping wax taken up inside, perfected and transfigured by the perfume – well, it would be like a symphony that has earned, through its sensitive execution of every previous mood and movement, the crowning moment of its performance, the crescendo, and transported its hearers into the realm of the ecstatic, where God may meet them.

Martha's act is *foundational*. It prepares the way for Mary's, makes space for Mary's, render Mary's intelligible and powerful.

I say intelligible because what does it mean to worship a God who saved us by serving us, if we do not live out our salvation through our service of others?

I say powerful because, when a person in the room suddenly brings and pours out to Jesus the most precious thing she possesses, it confirms that the Church worships who it claims to worship in the midst of all its predictable activities and dependable rhythms.

As the Apostle Paul writes,

“If then, there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:1-4).

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

[Let us pray.]