



SERMONS THAT WORK

Monday in Holy Week

Faithful Friends

[RCL]: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

In today's gospel passage, we encounter the Bethany family: siblings Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. We have met Martha and Mary before, in the well-known passage from Luke's gospel (Luke 10:38-42) when Jesus and his disciples rest on the road to Jerusalem in the home of sisters Mary and Martha. Remember that Martha, doing all the work of the house and hospitality while her sister Mary sits at the Lord's feet and listens to his teaching, asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her. Jesus' reply, that Mary has chosen the better part, is often taken to mean that Mary is focused on what is holy, while Martha is distracted by the tasks of the world. Sometimes Mary is described as the contemplative sister, while Martha is contrasted as the active sister.

In the eleventh chapter of John, we learn much more about this family and their role in the last weeks and days of Jesus' life. This family is central in Jesus' final and pivotal miracle, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. We learn that Jesus loves the siblings, but when the sisters send word that their brother is ill, Jesus delays going to them. Also in John 11, we are introduced to the complex relationship between Jesus' followers and the Jews. When Jesus finally proposes returning to Judea to respond to the sisters' summons, his disciples warn him: "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" (John 11:8). In this passage Jesus and the Jews are antagonists. In contrast, we learn something important about the Bethany community of Jews. While Jesus delayed, Lazarus has died. In fact, by the time he gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. John writes, "Many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother" (John 11:19). Some scholars, including Adele Reinhartz in her *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John*, suggest that the Bethany family were Jewish followers of Jesus, living in harmony in the Jewish community.

Are the Jews who tried to stone Jesus the same Jews who comforted Martha and Mary in their loss? Yes. And no. Let us simply say that there was diversity within the Jewish community, multiple ways of being Jewish. Some Jews were threatened by the popular young teacher; some Jews accepted him as Messiah; some Jews were willing to live in a society with a diversity of beliefs and practices.

With her brother in the tomb and her sister at home in the company of their Jewish neighbors, Martha goes to meet Jesus on the road. There she affirms her faith: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and

those who believe in him will never die. Then Jesus, with Martha, Mary, and the weeping Jews, goes to the tomb, and the dead man is raised to life. The raising of Lazarus is pivotal both because it foreshadows Jesus' own death and resurrection, and also because the miracle—and Jesus' great love for his friends—persuades many of the witnesses to join his followers, thus further threatening the Jewish religious and political establishment. From that time forward, Jesus was a marked man. The scene is set in motion for his arrest and passion. He lies low for a while, but Passover approaches and Jesus has a destiny to fulfill. He turns toward Jerusalem.

As our gospel passage for today begins, Jesus has stopped in Bethany, seeking rest at the home of his friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, who provide a meal for him and his disciples. Mary, in an act of reverence and humility, anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfumed oil, and wipes his feet with her hair. In the passage from John, Judas is named as the disciple who reprimands her, though in both Matthew's and Mark's versions of this scene, this rebuke is made by unnamed disciples. Jesus defends her and makes the enigmatic comment: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." What could he possibly mean by this seemingly callous remark about the poor?

A little research into the family at Bethany is revealing. Mary and Martha appear to be unmarried, independent young women, unusual at the time. Scholars speculate that they may have belonged to an ascetic Jewish sect, possibly the Essenes. Evidence from the Dead Sea scrolls, as well as historians Josephus and Jerome, suggests that Bethany was the location of a hospice for lepers and the poor, a center of charity. In fact, Bethany – *beth 'anya* in Aramaic – translates as *House of the Poor* or *House of the Suffering*. It is likely that the gospel references to the house in Bethany refer to a communal home, of which Martha was the housekeeper. The costly nard perfume may have been a donation from a wealthy benefactor for the benefit of the poor. This would explain the disciples' comment about selling the perfume and giving the money to the poor. It would also explain Jesus' words about the poor being always with them.

What we do know for sure is that both Martha and Mary were women of great faith and devotion. Martha, even in the face of her brother's death, declares unequivocally that she believes. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in him, even if they die, shall live forever. "Yes, Lord," says Martha, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Her declaration of faith is no less stunning than Mary's act of devotion at Jesus' feet.

And Lazarus. His love for Jesus will cost him dearly as well. As the man who has been raised from the dead, he is dangerous. Here we see the stark contrast between the chief priests and the Jews of the community. Since many of the people, on account of Lazarus, have deserted the priestly establishment to follow Jesus, the chief priests resolve to put Lazarus to death as well. The gospels do not reveal what happened to Lazarus of Bethany. According to tradition in Southern France, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were put out to sea by Jews hostile to the followers of Jesus, in a boat without sails or oars. They landed miraculously in Provence, where Lazarus went on to preach and convert many to Christianity, became Bishop of Marseille, and was later martyred during the persecution of Domitian.

Now, on the Monday of Holy Week, six days before Easter, we await with the Bethany family, Our Lord's betrayal, arrest, and passion. Like them, we know what is coming. We will have great need of our faith during this week's journey to the cross. May we, like Martha, offer our faith in the sure knowledge of resurrection and eternal life. May we, like Mary, offer our most precious gifts in devotion at the feet of the Master. May we, like Lazarus, offer our lives as witness to God's word and deed. May we, in humility, love, and confidence, offer a place in our hearts for our dear friend, brother, and Lord, Jesus, to rest on his journey. Amen.

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