

Martha Being Martha

Notes from After the Sermon

In our Scripture reading this morning (John 12:1-8), we are now 6 days from Passover; so, we are getting closer to the end of Jesus' ministry. Now when the Scripture was read, you may have missed Martha entirely. In these verses, she is given just 2 words, "Martha served." What is the significance of those 2 words?

Starting with the obvious, what is Martha doing in our Scripture? She is serving. What is so special about that? We know from 2 weeks ago that Martha is a doer. But 2 weeks ago, she was less focused on her task and more focused on what her younger sister, Mary, wasn't doing. Mary, you recall, was sitting at the feet of Jesus and Martha couldn't take it. But this time, there are no angry words – no complaining to Jesus. Martha is finally comfortable being Martha. She is content to be Martha, not only for her only self, but in front of others and in front of Jesus. In Romans 12:4-7, Paul says: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving (or serving), leading, and being compassionate. Martha has finally found and has accepted her gift: serving. It may not be very exciting, and some may downplay her gift – but Paul recognizes the importance of it and if we think about it, it is essential. Someone needs to be the one to step up and just get things done. Have you found your gift and are you using it for Christ? I don't know what God is calling you to do but as my pastor recently said, if you are still breathing God has a call on your life.

There's another question to be asked from our Scripture which is, what is Martha letting Mary do? Sit at the feet of Jesus. Martha is now comfortable letting Mary be Mary. Are we content letting others be true to themselves, or do we feel the need to "fix" them? In Christian love, of course! We need to not only allow others to find their gifts, but we should be encouraging them in their discernment process.

The most interesting part of our Scripture lesson for me, however, is the less obvious. If we return to Luke 10:38 we know that Martha issued the invitation to Jesus and the disciples to stay at their home. Martha was the oldest and she was

the head of the household. So, what does that mean? As head of the household, Martha was in control of the house. The Scripture tells us that the oil Mary used was pure nard. Nard comes from a plant indigenous to the Himalayan regions of Nepal, China, and India. While today you can buy it on Amazon (of course), it would have had to have been imported to Israel by foot traffic, boat and camel in Jesus' time. Our Scriptures also tell us that Mary used a pound of pure nard oil. Who uses a pound of oil? John tells us that the value of the oil, at the time, was 300 denarii. I did some more checking. That was the average yearly salary of a "middle income" worker at the time. If we equate salaries from then to now at about \$10/hour, making it easy and using a 40/hour week and 300 days a year, that comes out to \$24,000. What is my point? The oil was extravagant. But what is my real point? Martha is not only comfortable being Martha and comfortable with Mary being Mary, but she is comfortable with Mary giving an extravagant gift. What a long way our Martha has come!

Understanding the value of the oil, we now come to the question directly posed in the Scripture. What do think about Judas's objection. Judas says: "Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?" Who was right, Judas or Mary? Jesus clearly takes Mary's side and makes a somewhat startling statement. "Leave her alone," Jesus says, "she bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Jesus, of course, knows that his death is coming. And isn't it better to spend time with loved ones and share with loved ones while they are living rather than waiting until they are dead? And, of course, Jesus knew that he wouldn't be staying dead – so there was no need for burial oil. But next Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Isn't that a cold statement to make? Is Jesus really saying that we don't need to care for the poor because what difference does it make?

Jesus was actually quoting from the Torah – kind of like starting a sentence where others would know the ending. Jesus' quote about the poor always being with us, is taken from Deut. 15:7-11:

*"If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be...**For the poor you will always have with you in the land. Therefore, I command you, 'You shall***

open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'"

But the Scripture really goes to the nature of Judas's objection. As John tells us, Judas's concern was not for the poor. Judas, in fact, was stealing money which was to go to the poor. So, basically, Judas wanted Mary to give him the nard so he could sell it and pocket the proceeds.

Jesus was validating that in this instance, with his death coming, Mary's heart was in the right place and she was acting out of love. Martha, who was standing by while all this was happening and serving as she was called to do, recognized the significance of what her sister was doing and allowed it to happen.

Martha doesn't factor much in Scripture. She is outshone by her sister who sits with Jesus and by her brother who is known by all as having been raised from the dead. On the first occasion, she has an outburst and made an object lesson when told that Mary has chosen the better part. On the second occasion, she runs to Jesus, breaking tradition, to ask why he let her brother die. On that second occasion, though, she shows us the true depth of her faith, referring in one sentence to Jesus as Lord, Messiah, and Son of God. And finally, in our last view of Martha, we see a woman who is content to be where she is, content with who she is and what she is called to do, and content to allow others to use their gifts as they are called to do, and in so doing, provides a faith lesson for us.