

"The Beauty of Being Served"
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Year C
March 21, 2010
Text: John 12:1-8
Dr. David T. Howeth

Jesus had best friends. He not only had his disciples he was training to carry on his teachings after him; he not only had the women who supported his ministry monetarily; he not only had the crowds that followed him; he not only had those individuals he healed in one way or another. Jesus had close, personal, intimate friends with whom he spent special times whenever he had the chance. And there was one home in which he was a frequent guest, the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha.

And this is where we find Jesus in our Gospel lesson for today. He is once more with his best friends, and they are throwing a dinner party for him. There is much to celebrate about on this special occasion, for Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Now that's a pretty good excuse to have a party!

It's a beautiful scene. Can you imagine it? There is Lazarus at the table with Jesus—talking, laughing, eating a meal that were it not for the grace of God, they would not be sharing together. There is Martha. What is she doing? Serving dinner, of course. You remember Martha. She is the dutiful one, the busy one, the perfect hostess, the one who wants so much for everything in the house to be just right for Jesus when he comes to visit. She works hard to please, and she can't sit still,

not even for a moment.

That is why Jesus gently had to tell her once that sometimes her priorities weren't quite what they ought to be. Unlike her sister, Mary, Martha could not take a break from her chores long enough to enjoy a conversation with Jesus when he came to visit. Jesus had to say to her on that occasion, "Martha, Martha, you are so worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."

Martha is the practical type, sometimes overly so. When Jesus came to their home after Lazarus had died, it was Martha who told Jesus that she believed him to be the Messiah and that God would give him whatever he asked of God, but yet when Jesus suggested that the stone be taken away from Lazarus' grave, it was Martha whose sole concern seems to have been the smell that would be released from the tomb. But Jesus loved Martha, and there is beauty in the way she always worked so hard to serve him.

There is beauty in her service. She serves out of love. *That's how she loves*, by serving, by making sure everything is done correctly, by fussing over details, by putting just the right touch on things. She may not be able to say, "I love you" with words. Perhaps she is not particularly affectionate. Intimacy may not come easily for her. But she loves; *she loves by doing*. She expresses how she feels by the way she sets the table, the way she cleans the house, the way she cooks the meal, the way she does the laundry, the way she mends the clothes. Jesus knows it, and he loves her. Martha serves the meal in this story, and it is a beautiful thing, her serving the Lord the way in which she is most comfortable, in the way that comes most naturally for her.

And there is Mary. Mary is so very different from her sister. We know this about her from the stories we already have mentioned. Mary is more emotional. Unlike Martha, who could go out to greet Jesus when he came to the house after Lazarus had died, Mary was in deep despair, an emotional wreck. She is less practical. She is not so concerned about details. And we learn even more about her from our story this morning. She can be dramatically intimate and extravagant in her display of affection. She purchases a pound of costly perfume. How costly was it? Supposedly it was worth three hundred denarii, a year's wages in that day, equivalent to \$25,000.00 or \$30,000.00 or more in today's money [Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, p. 256]. That's extravagance! No wonder Judas, who served as the treasurer for the disciples, is shocked at Mary's act.

But the price of the perfume is not the only shocking detail of Mary's performance. For a woman to let down her hair in front of a man other than her husband or immediate family would have raised eyebrows. And the feet were considered to be private, off limits, not to be touched by another person. Mary's act, then, is an extremely personal, almost sensual one, pointing to the selfless abundance of her devotion to Christ. If this gesture had occurred in another context, it might have been seen as shameful. Even here it is radical, dramatic, extreme [Bruce, p. 256, and Morris, *The Gospel According to John* in NICNT, pp. 576-7].

The feet in those days stayed dirty. You can picture the scene. Streets weren't paved, and people wore sandals. Washing the feet would have been a disgusting chore, one meant for personal slaves alone.

Only a humble servant should have to clean feet. Mary's act is one of gracious, self-giving love. And it is beautiful. That is what Jesus calls it in the account of this story in Mark's Gospel, *kalon ergon* in Greek, a beautiful, right, good thing. *The service Mary gives to Jesus, like the service of her sister Martha, is beautiful.*

It is beautiful to serve the Lord and to serve one another in either of these ways—more indirectly, as Martha, or more directly, as Mary. More from a distance, as Martha, or more up-close and personal, as Mary. More in terms of working, as Martha, or more in terms of touching, as Mary. It always is beautiful when love is expressed through service, no matter the ways and means.

As Christians, we are called to serve. We know that. As those who follow Jesus as Savior and Lord, we are to be servants of God and servants of one another. I think all of us understand the beauty of serving, but I also want us to understand the flip side, the beauty of being served. My feeling is that Martha and Mary's acts of service are not all that is beautiful in this scene at Lazarus' house. *What also is beautiful is Jesus' reception of their acts of obvious love and devotion.* Jesus gives them the opportunity to express how they feel about him. While it is true that Jesus does not come into the world for the purpose of being served, he is comfortable enough with himself and with others to allow those who love him to attend to his needs.

Jesus' willingness to be served is as beautiful as is the beauty of Mary and Martha's serving him. Why do I say that? Because Jesus' willingness to be served is an expression of a healthy and an absolutely necessary sense of self-worth and self-love. Both Mary and Martha's

acts of serving Jesus were a way of saying to him, "You are worth this, worth the very best we can do for you." For Martha, Jesus is worth her best effort in preparing the meal and serving it to him. For Mary, Jesus is worth the purchase of the most expensive perfume she can buy and the performance of the most outwardly demeaning act of washing his feet with it using her hair. And in Judas' protest of the extravagance of what has been done for Jesus, there is expressed just the opposite to him, "You are not worth this." In accepting in gratitude the service of these sisters, Jesus is saying to them and himself, "Yes, I am worth this."

Jesus can value himself, respect himself, honor himself, be gracious to himself by allowing himself to receive the expressions of value, respect, honor, and grace extended to him by others. His self-esteem is healthy, whole, and beautiful. Is yours? Can you do the same? Do you love yourself enough to let others serve you, compliment you, meet your needs, offer you assistance, affirm you, congratulate you, care for you in loving ways?

Can you receive as a gift the kind acts people would like to do for you? Or do you find ways to avoid, duck, deflect, or deny the nice things those who love you would like to say to you? "That was a nice tee shot, Dad." "I sure don't hit the ball the way I used to." "That was a great meal, Mom." "The meat was overcooked." "I like that dress on you, Sweetheart." "I need to lose ten pounds." "Good game, Son." "I can't believe I struck out my second time at bat." "I enjoyed your performance, Princess." "Daddy, didn't you see how bad my splits were?"

Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse is a psychiatrist and theologian who used to teach at Perkins. She has an insight which has been particularly helpful to me, and because it has been so helpful, I have shared it with you before. Barnhouse says that when our lives are centered in Jesus Christ, our lives are resting on a three-legged stool: love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. Do you know what happens with a three-legged stool if one of the legs is missing or is significantly shorter than the other two? That stool just won't stand up, and our lives won't either if we don't maintain a pretty even balance between these three aspects of love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self [Lecture, Florida Winter Pastors' School, Stetson University].

I think it is a mistake, a sad one indeed, when the church spends most or all of its time talking about how much you need to love God and love your neighbor, but fails to mention that you can't begin to do either one unless you love yourself. It is extremely important and necessary for you to love yourself. Yet, we receive so many negative messages from the world around us and even from the church. "You're no good," is what we are told. You might be good if you bought this product, performed up to this standard, made this amount of money, looked this particular way, but since you don't, you're just no good.

The negative messages we have received about ourselves have come many times from our own homes, our own families of origin. Here's an illustration. In a recent "Peanuts" cartoon, Charlie Brown has picked up his bat and glove and is heading for the front door. His sister says to him, "Don't tell me you're going out to play baseball again." She follows him out the door and yells to him from the front porch, "You're gonna

lose! You always lose! I'm your sister, and I know." In the last frame, Charlie Brown is walking toward the baseball field with his glove on his hand and his bat over his shoulder. He mutters to himself, "Family values." It's sad, but true, that *we sometimes learn in our families to value almost everything more than ourselves*. In fact, often we have been taught to devalue ourselves and picture ourselves as having little worth and little importance by those persons who should be the most committed to us.

But we are taught in scripture to imitate Jesus, to be like him. Yes, that means to love God as he did, to be obedient to God to the extent of being willing to die on a cross. Yes, imitating Jesus means to love and serve others as he did, to be willing to lay down one's life for one's friends. But *it also means to love yourself as he loved himself, to be served as he was served*.

To imitate Jesus means to see yourself as a precious child of God, to see yourself as a person of value and worth, to see yourself as a work of art, a gift of God to the world. It means to honor and respect yourself. It means being able to receive and appropriate grace from God and from other people. To imitate Jesus means opening up and allowing those persons who love you to express how they feel—through their work, through their touch, through their words. It means being willing to let others serve you. There is beauty in being served. I pray that you can give yourself permission to discover this beauty for yourself and to become more Christlike in the process.