

Dinner with Jesus

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, March 21, 2010)

John 12:1-8 (TEV) ¹Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, the man he had raised from death. ²They prepared a dinner for him there, which Martha helped serve; Lazarus was one of those who were sitting at the table with Jesus. ³Then Mary took a whole pint of a very expensive perfume made of pure nard, poured it on Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The sweet smell of the perfume filled the whole house. ⁴One of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot—the one who was going to betray him—said, ⁵“Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?” ⁶He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would help himself from it.

⁷But Jesus said, “Leave her alone! Let her keep what she has for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me.”

Well, here we are, on the brink of another great holiday season. This is the last Sunday of Lent, next Sunday is Palm Sunday, and then it is Easter. Our Scripture Lesson for this morning parallels our season. It is the last reading in John before Jesus goes into Jerusalem, his triumphal entry. The setting for our lesson today seems quiet, folksy, just down home, we might say. Jesus has come to the outskirts of Jerusalem, to Bethany, and here he is sitting with his good friends, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Let's take a look around the table and talk about the folks who are there, see where we might fit in, or as I would ask the question, “Which chair would be our chair at this table, if we were there?”

First, there is Mary. Well, she isn't really in a chair, she is sitting on the floor at Jesus' feet. This is the same place we found Mary at a previous dinner party. At that time, you remember, Martha was annoyed because Mary wouldn't help with the serving. Jesus reassured Martha then that it was OK, just to sit and listen and worship him. But this time Mary isn't just listening and worshiping. Mary does something extravagant. She anoints Jesus' feet with some incredible, costly ointment.

I have to confess that extravagance has never had a great appeal for me. Maybe I have seen too many people with too little that I don't get all caught up in extravagant things. Of course, what's extravagant in my mind may well be commonplace for another person, and what's commonplace for me may seem extravagant to someone else. So what is extravagant and what is not?

However we choose to describe extravagance, God has clearly been extravagant toward us. We can see the extravagance of nature in the beauty of flowers, the plumage of birds, the beauty of sunsets – all these are God's extravagant gifts to us. The most extravagant gift of all is God's gift of his only Son, our Lord Jesus. He gave his life for us, so that we might know forgiveness, so that we might have eternal life. Now there is extravagance – more than we can fully comprehend.

Jesus knew that his own death was coming and he praised Mary for an act of worship that foreshadowed his death. There were no words that could detract from Mary's devoted act of worship, even Judas' miserly words, just as there are no words that can detract from our devoted acts of worship. Could you sit in Mary's chair, even though it is not a chair, at the feet of Jesus, and worship him with extravagance?

Martha served – yes, dear Martha is still serving. That is all it says, but that alone speaks volumes. Although Jesus told her that serving isn't everything, certainly not the most important, Martha still served.

Each one of us is called to serve, to bring our talents, our strength, our abilities, & use them in service to God. There is nothing that is beneath us, and there is nothing that is too difficult for us because if it is God's will, God will give us sufficient strength to accomplish the task.

And it doesn't matter who you are or how important you are, there are always opportunities for humble service. During the Revolutionary War, a group of soldiers was struggling to lift a heavy log from a roadway. It was plainly too heavy for them, but their corporal just stood by, barking orders at

them. At that moment, a man rode up on horseback. The stranger dismounted and walked over to give a hand. With a great “one-two-three-heave,” they all picked up the log, and moved it to the side of the road. The stranger turned to the corporal, and asked him why he hadn’t been helping. “Sir,” the officer replied, “do you not see that I am the corporal?” At that point, the stranger opened his coat, revealing his general’s insignia. “Yes, sir, I see that you are the corporal,” he said, “but I want you to see that I am the general.”

General George Washington taught the corporal a lesson that day — a lesson in humility; a lesson in service. Washington was that rare sort of leader who seems to have understood Jesus’ teaching about the first being last, and the last being first. Washington knew that a true leader must know how to serve.

Martha served. Could you sit in Martha’s chair, symbolized by a folding chair because she didn’t often sit down, but she was on her feet, serving?

Lazarus was there – he was one of those at the table. It doesn’t tell us what Lazarus did, but he was there –that in and of itself is important. You remember – Lazarus was the one who died. He was so dead that his body began to decompose, or at least that is what Mary and Martha thought. But Jesus gave him life. And he was there at the dinner table when Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.

Now you might say that’s not such a big deal, but the truth is that so many fail, so many fail to be there, at our Lord’s table. Lazarus was dead, but Jesus gave him life, and Lazarus was at the table. How many have received the new life in Christ, but they are not here today. I often think about the more than half the members of this church who have failed to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion even once within the past 4 years. That bothers me – it should bother each one of us. I have visited some, and I know that many of you have encouraged some to return. I guess all of us who are here this morning are, in a sense, in Lazarus’ chair.

We are here, with our Lord. But there seem to be a lot of empty chairs out there. Even on Easter, when more people come to worship and receive Communion than any other time of the year, there still will be empty chairs, many who have been given new life in Christ will not be here. Lazarus was there – can we encourage all who have received new life in Christ to be here?

Judas was there, too, being Judas. I have assigned the special chair to Judas – after all, he was a DISCIPLE, he held the money for the disciples, he was important! More significantly, Judas had his own agenda, and it wasn’t giving alms to the poor, as he was fussing at Mary. Many have argued that Judas was a zealot who just wanted to push Jesus to action. He may well have believed fully in the power of Christ, but he wanted Jesus to overthrow the Roman occupying forces, to use force. 30 pieces of silver really wasn’t that much money – I don’t think he betrayed his Lord for the money, just like he wasn’t really worried about the money in our lesson today. I cannot understand what motivated Judas, but he certainly had his own agenda, and it was **not** to seek God’s will.

Are you sitting in Judas’ chair? Did you bring your own agenda? Do you have ideas about what this church should and should not do to the extent that you can’t hear God? Have you ever said that there is something in the church that shouldn’t be here, or maybe some things being done that YOU think should not be done in church? Or is your heart and mind open, seeking to learn God’s will, to see things from God’s point of view?

Come to dinner with the Lord. Choose your chair carefully. Do not sit in the self-righteous seat of Judas, but aside from that, feel free to sit in Lazarus’ chair, and bring others to sit in those empty chairs. Serve the Lord with strength and dedication, so that you can sit down, from time to time, in Martha’s chair. Or sit in Mary’s chair; worship the Lord, with extravagance, remembering that he gave his all for you.

Come to the table, come to dinner with Jesus, and take your chair at the table of the Lord. Amen.