

SERIES: STEADFAST LOVE
SERMON: A PLACE AT THE TABLE
SCRIPTURE: JOHN 12:1-8

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
APRIL 6, 2025
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Can we just try to wrap our brains around the joy that is Martha's table? I know, in that patriarchal society, it is probably Lazarus' table, but I think we can all agree this is Martha's domain. She is the one who is navigating this meal and all its important details. There is always one matriarch who gets to do that right? Nobody encroaches on her domain. And I think we can all get a sense of the joy in this occasion. If you have ever gathered around the table after the loss of a loved one, you know how empty that one seat feels. But there is no empty seat here, for Lazarus, who was dead, lives...thanks to the guest of honor...Jesus.

Martha is certainly going to go all out on her signature dishes and make sure every detail is just right to celebrate the occasion. Martha served. I can image every time she came into the room to set down another bowl or dish, she ran a hand across her brother's shoulder...as if needing to touch him and affirm he is bodily still with them. Maybe she sets every fresh dish down in front of Jesus first, wanting to show him the abundance of her appreciation. Maybe she gives him extra helpings of his favorite dishes. She is busy, but she is grateful that this is not a meal of grief. At least, it wasn't...until Mary came into the room.

While Martha hustles and bustles around, distracted by the tasks at hand, Mary is quiet and steady. Without a word, she walks to Jesus, opens a jar of extremely expensive perfume, pours the whole bottle on his feet, wiping it all around with her hair. It is an astonishing sight...one that probably made some uncomfortable, as societal rules would have prohibited her from taking her hair down in mixed company. Maybe it was also a triggering scene. It hasn't been long now since she and her sister were anointing their brother's body for burial...maybe the smell stirs that memory in them...but this time, it is Jesus who is the recipient, not Lazarus. Jesus is the one anointed by this precious woman offering a precious gift...a year's worth of wages, poured out on the feet of a man headed to the cross. All of it poured out. She holds nothing back.

Do we?

What always strikes me about Mary's story is whether we are listening to Martha complain about her lack of work or Judas complain about her wastefulness...someone always wants to be critical of what Mary has to offer. Martha wants her to do more...to work harder...to be helpful. Judas wants her to do less...to be more like him...to be greedy. Oh, he pretends it is the poor he is worried about...she has been wasteful when she could have sold the perfume and fed the hungry...but John wants us to know this is a ruse...Judas doesn't care about the poor...he cares that the costly perfume hadn't found its way into his hands.

It seems only Mary has been listening to the rising rumors that Jesus would soon die...she alone, was listening and preparing to show him just how much she loved and adored him. She would not wait until he was dead to honor his body with loving care, she would do it now...she

would worship him now...not for what he was about to do, but for who he is at the moment. Jesus. The King. The Messiah. The anointed one.

I feel I know these two sisters...one worried and distracted, the other worshipful and devoted...I feel I've seen them in action...servant and sacrament bearer. Maybe because I've seen versions of them played out in every family meal and church potluck, all my life...each one having people who serve and people who don't...people who work and people who attend to a different task of just being in the moment.

Jesus said to Martha, Mary has chosen the better way. To Judas, he said, leave her alone...she is offering me a gift. The truth is, Mary has offered all of us a gift. She has shown us the power of worship. She has shown us the power of utmost generosity...of pouring out all we have and all we are for the sake of praising Jesus...even when others say it is folly.

I just keep coming back to that table. To the lifetime of conversations that have happened there. To the living and the dying that is represented in each chair pulled up or pushed back. Every table needs someone to serve. Martha's work is important...but it doesn't stand alone.

Every table also needs those who sit and listen...who hold the stories and celebrate them with special moments. Those who are intuitive to the needs and power of the moment. Mary is our story-keeper...the one who leads our worship...the one who guides us to see more than what is on the surface.

The choir has been working on a beautiful anthem which reminds us that there is never just one way of honoring Jesus: Every valley in life needs a lily that highlights its beauty. Every canyon needs a river that carves its unique shape and path. Every journey needs a shepherd to offer direction and care. Every window needs a candle to bring light when the panes fall into darkness. Every cold, empty winter needs some snow to blanket the earth in peace.

If we are all Martha's and Judas', we are far too pragmatic and dogmatic to find the true beauty of what Mary does for us in this moment...which is to be our lily, our river, our shepherd, our candle...our snow. She is the one at the table that opens our eyes to the glory of Christ. She is the one who embraces the mystery, commits her all, and moves into a worship that is uncomfortable, inspiring, and life-giving.

The truth about worship is, it is service, like Martha. It is generosity to the poor, like Judas claimed. But it is also abundant joy in the moment...lavish praise poured out with abandon...like Mary...pointing us to see the praise that should be Christ's...the glory given to the one who will give all.