

March 21, 2010 - Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple [PDF] (Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8)

I'm one of those hostesses that finds giving a dinner party practically excruciating. I am a nervous wreck. And I'll put on that smile and I'll tell you, "Oh, come in, come in." I am sitting there noticing every piece of dust I didn't get to, worried about what's in the oven not coming out right, and I just find it stressful. That's why many of you have never been invited to my house.

Martha, however, Martha loves to cook. Martha loves to have people over. Martha loves to stay busy. And you'll remember, though not from the Gospel of John, but from the Gospel of Luke, it's Martha that gets scolded by Jesus because she's getting irritable and impatient working in the kitchen getting everything ready and Jesus says, "Martha, relax. You need to come and sit here and listen. And listen."

That was Luke. This is John. Martha and Mary are having a dinner party for Jesus. They're having it, they say it's in the home of Lazarus. These are hints that Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus are one household. We never hear about any spouses or children. We can't be sure, but it very much appears that this is the home that they've made amongst them -- three adult siblings, single. And Jesus is honoring them in a very particular way. Things have gotten pretty tough for Jesus at this point in his ministry. It's very clear that the authorities are hunting for him. That they want to take him out of the picture one way or another.

Things are not all that easier for Lazarus because Jesus, once he raised Lazarus -- you remember this, right? -- once he raised Lazarus from the dead, Lazarus is now a big problem to the corrupt religious authorities. He's a sign of the power of Jesus. And because of the raising of Lazarus, more and more people are following Jesus. When Mary and Martha decide to give a dinner party, we're going to have to kind of ask what exactly was the atmosphere of this party? Was it a reunion of close friends and disciples? Was it a celebration and a thanksgiving for the restoring of life to Lazarus? Or was there a tone in that room, in that home -- in that tender, sweet home that night was there a tone of joy and sorrow? Was there a sense as we all have at a wonderful gathering of friends that soon, oh too soon, there will also be a parting? Was there a sense that this was perhaps a going away party for Jesus?

At this dinner party six days before the Passover, we know that this is the beginning of the last week of Jesus' earthly life. The next day, the day we've come to call Palm Sunday, Jesus will ride into Jerusalem, be hailed as the blessed one, the one who comes in the name of the Lord, and many Jews will give him a royal welcome and some corrupt officials will make plans to betray him. Though Mary, Martha and Lazarus and the other guests may not know it, in five short days, Jesus and his disciples will gather for a different intimate supper, for what will become called The Last Supper. Counting down from this night in Bethany, very close to Jerusalem, in five days Jesus will be crucified and the day after the Passover, the seventh day, raised from the dead. But the guests at this point don't know this. They can't really know the pain, the suffering, the agonizing loss that is just around the corner. Or maybe they do.

For Jesus to return to Bethany and Jerusalem is courageous because he knows Jerusalem is the place where true prophets are martyred. In Jesus we see this courage to face both the joy of his fellowship with his friends and the fear of what is to come. The ministry of Jesus began with a wedding feast at Canaan, remember? In the Gospel of John, that's the first miracle? But oddly enough, it begins with that miracle, the changing of a vast amount of water into a vast amount of wine. That's the wedding. Here at Bethany, we actually have what I would call a rehearsal dinner. The Bethany supper is the rehearsal dinner for the events of Holy Week. It is a last chance for friends to gather in some kind of calm before a terrible storm. It is also the rehearsal dinner for what will become The Last Supper which I would call the "reversal dinner."

Compare these two dinners, the one in Bethany and the one to come a week later in Jerusalem. In Bethany, a dinner is being given for Jesus by his disciples, Lazarus and his sisters. But in Jerusalem, Jesus is the host and serves his friends. In Bethany, Martha serves Jesus as the guest of honor. In Jerusalem, Jesus serves his guests who could otherwise really be his servants and makes them his friends. At the rehearsal dinner in Bethany, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus. At the reversal dinner in Jerusalem, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. At the rehearsal dinner, Judas objects to the anointing of Jesus' feet. And at the reversal dinner, it is Peter who objects to Jesus washing his feet.

The Christian journey boils down so often to our ability, to the inevitability of great reversals in our life. And the rehearsal is our ability to be ready for what we cannot know, cannot anticipate and yet must face. Lazarus knows all about a great reversal. He's a walking example of reversal. Yes, he's brought back to life. Lazarus was brought back to life. And now there's people who want to kill him. New life in Christ has not made an easier life or a safer life or a more certain life, but it is a cost of discipleship that Lazarus rejoices to hold onto.

Martha is the sister who was scolded for doing her job, for doing her traditional duty and yet it is Martha, a woman, a powerless single woman, who becomes the key disciple in the Gospel of John before any resurrections have occurred -- before Lazarus is raised from the dead, it is Martha who claims and announces that Jesus is the Messiah. Such is the power to reverse the course of her life. It is Martha who gives this dinner party and takes the hospitality, the gift of hospitality she's been given, and allows it to minister to Jesus in his last days. Mary knows about reversals. She takes this oil, this oil that's worth a year's worth of wages, she takes this oil and extravagantly, radically pours it out over her friend Jesus' feet and then massages his feet and wipes them with her hair. A stunning reversal of the natural order of things.

Jesus knows that his time of suffering and death and the time of his glorification is at hand. At this second to the last supper, at this rehearsal dinner, Jesus is preparing his followers and us, and even his betrayer that we must be ready. We must be ready when life turns on a dime, and the way that we've loved things, the way that we've held things and had things reverses. And it's hard, and it's unknown, and it's uncertain, and we don't know where to look. Jesus is instructing his friends how to treasure each and every present moment with its joys, and its sorrows and see how today prepares us for the uncertainties ahead. This, my friends, is the way of the cross. To journey through our joys, our sorrows in community, and with the complete assurance that Jesus is with us along the way.

Liturgy is a rehearsal dinner in a sense. We rehearse things every Sunday. We rehearse confessing our sins because we certainly need to do that every day of our life. We rehearse passing the peace because we certainly need to do that every night. We rehearse coming around a table to share joy, spoken and unspoken, because we need to go back to other tables and share those joys and those pains and those sorrows and those betrayals and those moments of forgiveness.

When we gather around this table this morning, every Sunday morning, bring your sorrows, bring your joys, bring your fears and offer them up to the Lord. Many of us have experienced great reversals. You don't know where you'll be in a week. With a job, without a job. With health insurance, without health insurance. With a mortgage payment, without a mortgage payment. Will you let your fear of the unknown dominant your life? Will you let fear dominant public discourse or will we trust in a Lord -- I want to remind you, what did Judas keep his eyes on during the rehearsal dinner? His money. He kept his eyes on his money. What did Mary, Lazarus and Martha keep their eyes on? Jesus. Sometimes we forget and we say it's hard to see Jesus and then remember, oh, that's right, we look to the cross. We lift high the cross. We follow the cross wherever it might lead us because wherever it takes us, it will take us to each other, it will take us to the Lord and it will take us safely home.

Walk the way of the cross, my brothers and sisters, in these next two weeks. Walk those liturgies. I don't know about you, but I need to rehearse some stuff. I need to rehearse watching with Jesus. I need to rehearse praying through the dark night. I need to do that in community here so that I'll know how to do it out there when I need to. Walk with Jesus this Holy Season. And when we arrive at that day of resurrection, we will be ready. Amen.