

Lent 5C 2019, John 12:1-8, April 7, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

What a wonderful, precise drama, we were just privileged to hear. Five people in a tightly woven scene. Two sisters; Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. Jesus, their dear friend. Judas, a disciple of Jesus. Who are they?

First, Martha. She serves at meal. You've already seen her in another drama. Busy Martha, always tending to the needs of her guests, filling their cups and bowls, running to kitchen and stirring the soup. Proud to serve and resentful that she doesn't get enough help from her sister.

Mary, Martha's sister. Every time Jesus visits their home she sits and listens. She wants to soak in every word. The soup can wait when Jesus is here. There's too much to learn.

Lazarus, their brother. He doesn't speak. But he's changed. He had died. Dead four days before Jesus raised him. Does he sit in stunned silence? Or is he silent because he already knows, already sees from a perspective that we can only imagine? These three siblings had all grown to love Jesus and Jesus loved them all very much.

And then there's Judas. We all know what happens to Judas. John, our gospel writer reveals he was a thief who stole from the common treasury kept by the disciples. A tantalizing detail which offers up other unanswered questions. Was he always a thief? Was there a time when he did care for the poor? Here his words don't sound unreasonable. Mary used up over a year's worth of wages in pouring out that expensive ointment on Jesus' feet. Think about it. Maybe 50, 60 thousand dollars worth of perfumed oil for Jesus. Is it unreasonable to think that money could have been put to good use? How many meals at Water Street Rescue mission could that money buy? How many tanks of home heating oil for someone struggling to get by on just a meagre social security check, or bags of groceries, or medical supplies in the clinic?

The action of this little drama centers on Mary's act. If her actions don't make you at least a little bit uncomfortable they should. Picture Mary unloosing the clips holding her hair, tightly gathered against her head. Women don't show their hair in public. She lets it down to wipe Jesus' feet. It's a sign of sensuality and vulnerability at the same time. Certainly there would have been tension in the air, all sorts of disturbing thoughts flying about the room.

The best dramas reveal common aspects of our humanity. This is true with this drama. We see ourselves in Martha, the busy one. We find value and self-worth in being productive. We measure ourselves by the amount we give to others. We serve and do for others in part to make ourselves feel better, to assure

ourselves that we aren't just taking up space here on earth. There's more than enough Martha in all of us.

Judas' is not unreasonable. He may not have been sincere but he makes a point. Why shouldn't caring for the poor be our first priority? Why do we spend money on beautiful things honoring Jesus? Why are churches among the most beautiful and elaborate buildings on earth? Can't we worship God in humble homes, humble, plain meeting houses?

And then there's Mary. Devoted, extravagant, seemingly uninhibited Mary whose love for Jesus seems to cast every caution to the wind. She offers a gift so precious, so loving that we can only sit in awed silence. Mary is a model of faith and love. She is an ideal for Christian devotion to Jesus. Willing to risk the criticism of others in order to choose the better portion. We want to be like Mary, to give unconditionally. But something holds us back. We hear that voice, "That's too much. You need to think of your family. You need to think what others will think. You won't have enough left over."

There's one more person sitting in the background. One who remains silent. Does he have anything to teach us, even though he says nothing? Lazarus, just raised from the dead, sitting back and taking it all in. He's the one who has just experienced something profound, something so life-changing his world is turned upside down and he's not sure what is real and what isn't. Maybe from Lazarus' point of view things suddenly look entirely new. Judas' knows the cost of everything, right down to the very last penny. But maybe, just maybe Lazarus knows their real value, because he can see life from a radically different point of view. Death, though real, does not have the final word. That final word belongs to Jesus.

There's the central figure in this drama. Jesus welcomes Mary's extravagant gift of love. No criticism, no rebuke. By accepting her gift he points beyond it to coming events. Jesus sees the imminence of his own death, and Mary anointing his feet with perfume and tears foreshadows that event. In Jesus' death God the Father is at work putting an end to all our ways of holding on, tight fisted, knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing. The death of Jesus devalues all our attempts at our own security, our feeble desires to shore up our defensive position as those who care for others but really only care for ourselves. Who, if it really came to it, would do everything we can to keep ourselves in power, even at the cost of putting to death the only one who can show us the way out.

We see ourselves in these people. Martha, she's always so busy helping others, but she can't help wondering what others think of her. She measures herself on the opinions of others. Always with an eye on what they think of her. Judas, he's cost-conscious for the sake of a good that is still only self-serving. He says he's concerned for the poor, but at the end of the day his concern doesn't extend

any farther than himself. Mary, whose extravagant, reckless love sees beauty that others miss. And finally Lazarus, raised from the dead by Jesus, who now knows the true value of life, a value beyond wealth and the material possessions we so often use to give our lives value. But the one who matters is the one who sees you and me and welcomes our gifts of love because his life is the one given for all. Jesus sees us for who and what we are; careful and cautious like Martha, extravagantly loving like Mary, self-serving like Judas, hopeful for life like Lazarus. He sees us in the totality of our messy, conflicted lives and he loves us with a passion that will take him to a cross and a tomb and to resurrection. Amen.