

Lent 5-April 3, 2022

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

John 12:1-8

“At the Foot of the Cross”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

At first, I thought it was ironic that this week's gospel which depicts the very different behaviors of two sisters would follow last week's lesson of the very different behaviors of two brothers from the parable of the prodigal son. The differences between Mary and Martha are very similar to the differences between the younger and the older son from the parable of the prodigal son that we heard about last week. However, when I thought about these two lessons further, both readings simply identify the function of the two words in which God uses to speak to us throughout every story in the bible. The law and the gospel.

The older son in the parable from last week is much like Jesus' friend, Martha. They both were the doers. They were the law abiders just like the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus called the grumblers. They worked hard, but it seemed like their hard work never got them what they hoped for and when they didn't, they complained. When the older brother heard the commotion from the party that was given in honor of the return of his younger brother, he was upset. He was upset that he had never gotten even a little get together, much less a party, with his friends with inexpensive snacks from Walmart. He was upset that the calf that he had fed all those years was now slaughtered and prepared for his brother who had done nothing except come home empty handed.

We learned from an earlier visit from Jesus to the house of Mary and Martha, it was Martha who prepared the meal and welcomed him when Jesus arrived at the door of their house. It was Martha who noticed Mary who came to this dinner empty handed and didn't do anything to make the meal. And it was Martha who asked Jesus if he had noticed that she had been doing all the work and told Jesus to tell Mary to get to work. Unfortunately for Martha, Jesus responded that it was Mary who was doing the better thing. She was doing something better than working.

The younger brother who gets labeled as the prodigal son because of his reckless and wasteful behavior when he wasted all his inheritance wasn't expecting anything when he came home. He had just hoped to become one of his father's slaves and get room and board after he returned. The father in this story probably knew what his son had been up to in his absence. But he never asked him and what he had done while he was gone was never brought up again. The only thing that mattered to the father was that the son was home again. Instead of obliging the son's request to become a slave, the father restores his son to the same position that he had before he left. He was his son with the same privileges he had before when he squandered away all his inheritance. In the mind of the older son, the father was unfair by rewarding the bad behavior of the disobedient son. The obedient older son became angry with the father's unorthodox way of disciplining his children.

There were plenty of questionable things happening at the dinner party in Bethany. It does make sense that the dinner was given for Jesus. After all, without Jesus, Lazarus wouldn't have been at the dinner. He would still be dead. It seems like they should have been celebrating Lazarus a little too. But there are no words from Lazarus. He doesn't tell his sisters that he might write a book about his Death to Life experience. He doesn't

tell his sisters about who he saw in heaven. Instead, we are just told that Lazarus was there. And once again, Martha is serving, and Mary unfairly gets credit for doing the better thing which seems to be doing nothing at all.

The better thing that Mary was doing is described by where Mary was. Mary was at the feet of Jesus. This was not the first time Mary was found at the feet of Jesus. The first time that Jesus visited Mary and Martha's house Mary wasn't in the kitchen. She was at the feet of Jesus listening to him. Later when Jesus had been told that Lazarus was sick and Martha and Mary saw Jesus coming toward their home when Lazarus had already died, Mary didn't wrap her arms around Jesus and give him a bear hug. In humility, Mary fell at his feet. Now once again in the house with Martha serving and Lazarus eating at the table, Mary is at the feet of Jesus. This time Mary is doing more than sitting and listening to Jesus.

We aren't sure, but maybe Mary was the only person that really paid attention to Jesus when he said that he would be handed over as a criminal and suffer death on a cross and rise again. This day when Mary is at the feet of Jesus, she is doing more than listening to him. She is not just washing Jesus' feet with water to clean them from his walk to her house, but Mary was anointing them with an extremely expensive perfume. A perfume that overwhelmed the whole house. A perfume that awakened the senses of another character in this story. Martha likely had not only prepared and served a meal for Jesus, but it seems that all his disciples were there also. But when the perfume filled the house, it was Judas who accused Mary of wasting money that could have been put to better use just like the older brother accused the younger brother of wasting his inheritance. Judas' facade of sincerity was easily seen through by Jesus. Jesus knew that Judas wasn't concerned about the poor. Judas really wanted the money for himself.

Judas had calculated what Mary was wasting on the feet of Jesus would be equivalent to a year's wages and it was getting used on one person rather than feeding many poor people. Jesus stops Judas' accusations to Mary by protecting her and telling him to "Leave her alone." and now it seems clear that Mary has in fact kept this expensive pure nard knowing that the feet of Jesus would soon be nailed to a cross. Before this happens, Jesus himself will be at the feet of his disciples and washing their feet and will tell them to do for others as he was doing for them.

It does seem that Mary was one of the few people that believed Jesus when he said that he would be crucified. Maybe when you are at the feet of someone rather than in their face, you are more likely to hear and remember what you are being told. Mary, remembering these things Jesus said, must have also thought about the pain that Jesus would endure as she anointed his feet and wiped them with her hair. The cost that Mary spent anointing the feet of Jesus was nothing compared to the price Jesus paid for all our sins. At the feet of Jesus, at the foot of the cross, we bring nothing except our sins. And just as the father forgave the younger son by never bringing up his past again, Jesus forgives each one of us and remembers our sin no more.

Our feet often take us to places that can get us into trouble. As we approach Holy Week, I hope our feet bring us to a place where we remember when Jesus washed his disciples' feet on Maundy Thursday. Then on Good Friday, I hope our feet return and listen to the passion story when nails pierced through Jesus' feet, the feet that Mary anointed. Then as we draw near to the foot of the cross of Jesus, we give thanks that we too have a heavenly Father that has treated us unfairly. A heavenly Father that gives us a party celebrating our return. A heavenly Father whose son's foot that once were pierced have become the beautiful feet that bring us good news of salvation. Amen