

# Life and Death at the Dinner Table

---

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

*John 12:1-8*

I am a chaplaincy intern at the hospital this year, and I've noticed that when I talk to patients they are often looking forward to at least one thing: a good, home-cooked meal. There's something about being laid up in a strange bed, eating from a portable table stretched awkwardly across your lap that makes you yearn for grandma's pork biscuits and garden-grown green beans served at a cozy kitchen table, surrounded by the people you love. There is a kind of sacred warmth that wraps a family during these homecoming meals. It is a glowing warmth kindled by the deep satisfaction of savoring something delicious and familiar; it is stoked by the profound gratitude of sharing the experience with one who was nearly lost but has found health again. There is great joy at a homecoming meal.

There are times, however, when these homecoming meals do not occur, when a long treatment does not produce a cure, when a hopeful surgery does not restore health. Instead of the warmth of reunion, a family is faced with the emptiness of grief. At these moments, if a family is being genuinely cared for by the community, there is still a meal: a funeral meal. It may lack the joy of a homecoming meal, but it is no less sacred. Crockpots and casseroles begin to arrive at the door, salads of every variety spread across a countertop, the freezer gets stacked full of foil-covered entrees with baking instructions Sharpied on the top. At a funeral meal, a community tries to match the harsh emptiness of loss with a generous abundance of food. There is great love at a funeral meal.

We should be reading about a funeral meal today. In the eleventh chapter of John's gospel, we learn that Jesus' friend Lazarus was deathly ill. His sisters, Mary and Martha, had placed a call to the Great Physician, but he was out of town. Lazarus' health deteriorated quickly and soon the family was preparing his body for the grave. Women from the town of Bethany surrounded Mary and Martha to weep and wail with them. As was the custom, the women beat their breasts in a wild frenzy until their hair was crazy with grief. On the day of the burial, the family processed to the tomb. Anyone they passed in the streets joined the procession, because as the Rabbis taught, "it was the truest act of kindness, for the one for whom it was done could never repay it". Afterwards, Mary and Martha returned to Lazarus' home and sat shiva, literally in Hebrew "seven", a period of seven days when the mourning family accepted visitors and received a meal of compassion from their neighbors. In the midst of this time of mourning, Jesus arrived. And there at the foot of Lazarus' tomb, Jesus demonstrated that

he was not merely the Great Physician, but the Resurrection and the Life. A funeral meal became a homecoming meal.

The dinner we read about today in chapter 12 turns everything around. For starters, Jesus was on time to the meal, not four days late. He reclined at a seat next to Lazarus, a man who once knew the coldness of a stone tomb, but was now blanketed by the warmth of a crowded table. Martha was serving, making sure the women of Bethany who beat their chests in mourning now filled their stomachs (and their hearts) with joy. Mary, whose sister had worried about the stench of death, filled the room with the fragrance of perfume. And she did it with her hair. You remember that hair, wild with grief, frazzled and weary, now dripping with oil, glistening and brilliant. Wherever she walked, the house was saturated with the sweet smell. It was a sensuous feast, a communal celebration of life called out of death.

There are a lot of trustworthy and competent church treasures and finance officers in the world, men and women who can count the offering and crunch the numbers with Christian integrity. I'm sure Joe Harrison is one of them. Right, Joe? Judas Iscariot, on the other hand, was not. From the first moment Judas appears in the Gospel of John in chapter six, to his final curtain in chapter eighteen, Judas is the villain, the one who betrays Jesus. In the story today, he rudely interrupts the joyous celebration with his infamous question: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

The narrator is happy to explain away the question. Judas wants the money for himself. He's a greedy liar. But I'm not content with the narrator's parenthetical conclusion. Even if Judas' motives were villainous and corrupt, his question still has a certain moral sense to it. Mary's use of the nard is not very practical; it might even be considered wastefully extravagant, especially in light of the hard realities of poverty and hunger. And while I don't trust Judas to provide us with an accurate appraisal of the expensive perfume, he suggests it might sell for a year's worth of a laborer's income, any amount between \$30,000 and \$300 is a substantial gift to a person in need.

It is Jesus who points out that Judas' suggestion, (sell the oil, feed the poor) is not necessarily wrong but deficient, a few steps short of the truth. "Leave her alone," Jesus chides. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Where Judas saw perfume, Jesus saw a funeral anointing. Where Judas saw dollar signs, Jesus understood real value.

A few weeks before Caroline and I got married, we sold Caroline's townhouse and started moving into the house that would become our first home. While Caroline was working at the hospital one afternoon, I took it upon myself to help her pack up her kitchen belongings, and get them ready for the move. We did the move in stages, and by the front door we started a pile of stuff for the Goodwill.

As I wrapped dishes and combed through kitchen drawers, I came across a round, plastic, army green napkin ring. It looked to be about forty years old, dull and worn at the edges. It wasn't with a set of napkin holders. It was a random, solitary napkin holder. I chucked it in the Goodwill box, never to be seen again. About two months into our marriage, Caroline was making biscuits for our family Christmas dinner. She shouted from the kitchen, "Have you seen my biscuit cutter?" No, I said. I hadn't seen a biscuit cutter. "What does it look like?" "It's round, green, about the size of napkin ring..." There's trouble when you don't see something for what it truly is. Where Judas saw perfume, Jesus saw a funeral anointing. Where Judas saw dollar signs, Jesus understood real value.

The great feast in Bethany was a homecoming meal for Lazarus, it was a real life parable of a brother lost and found again. Mary's costly perfume was nothing short of the Prodigal Father's fattened calf. The great banquet in Bethany was also a funeral meal. Passover, the day of the Slaughtered Lamb, was six days away and the religious authorities were already conspiring to kill Jesus. Mary's pound of nard was a funeral anointing, a foreshadowing of the one hundred pounds of myrrh that would wrap the body of the Crucified Christ. Don't be deceived by Judas, Mary did not waste 30,000 dollars of perfume. She poured out a generous offering of gratitude and thanksgiving; she filled the room with a prophetic proclamation: Behold the light of Life has entered the world, and the darkness of death shall not overcome it.

Do not be deceived by Judas. Just as he reduced Mary's fragrant oil to its cash value, so too did he reduce "the poor" to a cash value. This remains one of the greatest challenges of life, particularly in our culture, the temptation to reduce the complexity of human life to dollars and cents. People without money are simply poor, never mind the ways in which we are all impoverished, never mind the invaluable ways in which the financially lacking are richly gifted. Jesus is right; we will always have the poor with us if we continue to look at people through the eyes of Judas.

We honor the true value of people when we see them as neighbors. When, like Jesus, we sit down at a dinner table together and we share our most precious gifts, whatever they may be, with one another. Charity is insufficient if it excludes people from the feast. Generous giving is a blessing to God when it gathers neighbors from every corner of life, and fills the entire community with the sweet fragrance of goodness and grace.

When we dine with Jesus, church, we begin to perceive life in all its fullness. We can comfort the sick and dying because we know that the gaping grave is really a crowded banquet hall. We can welcome people who are burdened by every circumstance of life, because we know that the poor among us are really our neighbors. We can witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ because we were lost once, but now we are found; we were dead once, but we are alive again!

So go forth, disciples of Christ, rejoicing in the satisfying fullness of the Good News, and filling this town with the sweet fragrance of life. Amen.