

Mary's Final Exam *John 11:55-12:11*

John's gospel approaches Holy Week with a sense of both wonder and foreboding that is both similar to and different from the other gospels. All four gospels foreshadow the coming betrayal and death of Jesus, a dark cloud on the horizon that Jesus' friends will not see, cannot grasp. And in all four gospels there are wonders and excitement building around Jesus and his entourage as they draw near to the Holy City. But in Matthew, Mark and Luke we're treated to what feels like a victory parade as Jesus ascends out of the Jordan river valley and climbs Mount Olive, while in John the progress is slower and the mood is more subdued.

John has shown us Jesus in hiding after a campaign on the temple porch that ended with the priests and rabbi's and their partisans chasing Jesus away with stones in their hands. So Jesus set up camp in the Jordan wetlands, where John used to teach and baptize, and for some weeks a growing parade of people made their way out there to renew the repentance that they had learned from John, and to hear from Jesus the gospel that had gotten him run out of the big city.

The retreat on the Jordan was much more fun than fighting with rabbi's on the temple porch, but it had to end because there was a family in a village just outside Jerusalem that got into trouble that only Jesus could solve. Martha and Mary lost their brother Lazarus to an illness so sudden and swift that Jesus couldn't get to them. And so for three weeks we've read in church about their grief, their struggle to understand why people out on the Jordan get healed, while their brother dies unhealed and unseen by Jesus.

Both Martha and Mary are devout, they both had loved and believed in Jesus through the years that Jesus had visited Jerusalem after leaving his brothers' carpentry shop to go out and save the world. Mary by all accounts was closer to Jesus, she would sit at his feet with the men, listening to Jesus' gospel while Martha assembled and prepared and served meals from her kitchen for the band of disciples that used her courtyard as a staging ground for whatever Jesus was doing in the city that week.

And we've already observed that with the death of Lazarus, it was Martha who first collected herself and got herself out to Jesus the moment she heard that Jesus was near the village. And Martha was both heartbroken and absolutely sound in the presence of the Savior who had inexplicably let her brother die. No phony piety from Martha! "You could have stopped this, you know!" she says to Jesus as soon as their eyes meet. But she goes on to meet this challenge with one faithful confession after the other.

Even now she believes, she tells Jesus. Yes, she knows that her brother will rise on the Last Day, and she knows exactly who Jesus is, the Son of God, the Christ. Martha knows the gospel and manages to say so. Mary, on the other hand, has an interview with Jesus that shows none of the tidiness and discretion that Martha was able to bring to the game. Given a private message, a whispered message from Jesus, Mary leaps up and runs from the house as if the whole place was on fire. All the mourners chase after her, and they're not far behind her when Mary tells Jesus that he could have saved her brother if only he's gotten a move on.

But there's no comforting words from Jesus, no sound confession from Mary because she just collapses at his feet and sobs incoherently as the crowd from her house swirls around her, trying to do for Mary what Jesus never had a chance to start. But it all ends well. Jesus gets it. He sheds tears of his own and lets the sisters lead him to the tomb where he does something deeper and wider and greater than the healing Martha and Mary had wanted from him while Lazarus was dying.

So here we are, a month, six weeks later, still caught between foreboding and wonder. Jesus has had to hide again, this time near the desert, away from the holiday traffic streaming down the Jordan to the Passover feast in old Jerusalem. The atmospherics are so bad that the wizards of smart are betting Jesus won't even show up at Passover this year. Yet amazingly he comes, and he and his men settle down again in Martha's courtyard, and Martha again opens her kitchen, and Mary again becomes the life of the party, first, I'm guessing, in the courtyard at the Lord's feet, and then at table where Jesus and Lazarus have started to eat.

And then Mary seems to come unglued at Jesus' feet all over again. She brings a pound of myrrh perfume from wherever this family hid their treasures, and she cracks it open and begins pouring the priceless stuff on Jesus' feet. Very strange, Leon Morris tells us. This spikenard myrrh was so precious that the ancients didn't pour it at all, they sprinkled it on finger tips and spritzed it in their hair at fashionable parties that Jesus and the disciples couldn't afford to attend. Judas, their treasurer, erupts at the sight, points out to anyone who'll listen that the perfume she's poured on Jesus' feet was worth about a year's pay.

John, who appears to have had a talent for counter-espionage, points out to us that Judas wanted to turn the perfume into cash because Judas held the cash box, and he was not above skimming from the contributions Jesus and the disciples made to the poor. He loved the poor because handling their charity was making Judas rich. Jesus, on the other hand disagreed with Judas on principle.

"Leave her alone," Jesus answered Judas, "that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you don't always have me." Jesus knows what no one else at dinner is willing to see. That Mary will need plenty sweet smelling stuff to make him presentable for burial once the Romans are finished with him by the end of next week.

It was literally a bittersweet moment for Jesus, to be so loved and honored by the one woman bold enough to sit with the men in the courtyard and learn some gospel. The fragrance that John remembered filling the house was reminiscent of the incense the priests would burn in the holy place to make old Israel's sacrifices and prayers smell sweet to God when his people needed forgiveness and help. Mary seemed to know that the sacrifice Jesus was about to offer was worth a whole lot more than the year's pay Judas would be able to get for her perfume at the market bazaar. And the point here is not that the poor don't matter.

Judas couldn't have been tempted, his argument couldn't have been made unless Jesus and his friends were in the habit of giving to the poor. The Bible is filled with exhortations to remember and be kind and be generous to the poor. The point here is that love for neighbors, kindness to strangers, generosity to the needy all find their origin in the love and devotion that lives in our hearts for God and gets expressed in the worship and attention we offer to him, first. We love Christ first, before any other consideration, and only then do the other loves in our lives find their proper place and weight.

And this was the final exam that Mary passed without saying a word. She doesn't get high grades for articulation, our Mary from Bethany. But it could be that we place too much weight on knowing and saying and doing the right thing, wowing and dazzling the people around us with how smart we are, how good we are, how capably we handle everything. There's something to be said for coming unglued and holding on to Christ's ankles every now and again. Something to be said for loving him so much that we occasionally lose track of practical considerations. It is a section of the final that I expect to struggle at. But there's still time for us smart guys to report to Mary for tutoring, to learn to love Christ first, no matter how much it costs.

The Disciple Becomes the Betrayer

As they were eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."

Matthew 26:21

Matthew, chapter 26, describes a holy week meeting in the chief priest's palace where old Israel's opposing parties coalesce around a plan to find and take Jesus by night and get him condemned before his followers awaken to the danger. Meanwhile, in the nearby village of Bethany, Jesus' small band of disciples finally fractures when a woman among their number wildly, extravagantly anoints Jesus with a precious oil for no apparent purpose the disciples could understand. Their treasurer, Judas, finally despairs that Jesus is off the rails, and he approaches the authorities and makes a deal so as not to go down himself when Jesus gets taken.

So it is while Judas cuts a deal with the priests and rabbi's that the other disciples take it upon themselves to remind the Savior that the Passover has come. So the room gets rented, and the tables are set, and as the sun goes down Jesus and the Twelve circle one of the tables and make their way through the early courses of a traditional Passover meal. But before the ceremony can start, Jesus must work his way through some dreadful business: *"Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."* So this was a burden Jesus had carried for some time, but the disciples avoided hearing it, wouldn't deal with it until Jesus made them face it at the dinner table during the last meal they would share this side of the Resurrection. And the news landed on them with terrible weight and suddenness. Matthew tells us, *"And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him, one after the other, 'Is it I, Lord?'"*

The fact that all of them could imagine themselves a betrayer is in one way, sweet. They had learned well Jesus' gospel that none of us is a hero in God's sight. They knew well that measure of fear the gospel is meant to instill, that any one of us could go wrong, that some trap of mind and heart and circumstance could put any one of us at odds with what God wants us to be and wants us to do. So they look to the Savior for reassurance, one by one, that he wouldn't be to one to turn on Jesus and betray the gospel. But Jesus ignores their questions to express his own heartbreak over what was about to happen: *"He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me."* For three years, the disciples had broken bread together, circled around a common bowl, full of wet stuff, sauce and meat and beans and spice. And they would use the flat bread as a kind of shovel, each of them pulling out his share, all of them experiencing a sort closeness and trust that isn't expressed at modern tables. They had shared everything and tonight one of them would break that trust. *"The Son of Man goes,"* Jesus said, *"just as it has been written, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had not been born."*

These are terrible words, frightening words, because they speak of how vulnerable, how dependent we are on God to preserve us from the sort of destiny that Judas was unable to avoid. But if taken the right way, these words are the very sort of warning that made the disciples so sweet, their hearts so soft and ready to repent, willing to be forgiven. Peter, full of bluster, will assure Jesus that he won't fail him. But, the truth be told, they all fail him. No one will stand by Jesus and go to the cross that night. But everyone who stayed at table will avoid the fate that Judas met. Because with Judas gone, the circle reforms and the Passover ceremony begins. Jesus stands and blesses the unleavened bread, he breaks the bread, distributes the pieces and says, *"Take, eat, this is my body."* Bread without yeast becomes a body without sin and simply by staying at table, that sinlessness gets given to us. Not because we're better than Judas, but because we stayed at table with Christ. Later in the meal, Jesus offers thanksgiving for the cup, *"... this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* So Jesus stood between us and the sins and failures that would make us like Judas if he hadn't.