

## **Dining with an Undead Man**

John 12:1-8

The Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 25, 2007

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A bottle of wine. A side dish. A small gift for the host or hostess. What sorts of things are appropriate to bring to a dinner party? I guess you need to take a couple of things into consideration. How well do you know the host or hostess? The other guests? Is this a work related party or strictly a social event? Formal or informal? What, exactly, is the reason for the shindig? Do you actually want to be there, or do you just feel obliged to go?

This morning, the Gospel writer John has told us about a particularly significant dinner party. It was a few things at one and the same time. It was a casual, celebratory affair as well as a very serious and formal one. It was a celebration of new life as well as a foreshadowing of impending death. It was an acknowledgment of Jesus' ministry, while also an anointing of its temporary end. The guests at this complicated affair were disciples, good friends, an undead man, and a particularly ominous betrayer to stage left. What to bring, what to bring ...

What *did* they bring? For one thing, they all brought themselves. They showed up for the meal with Jesus, and most especially for the meal with the undead man whose name, Lazarus, means "God has helped." A day or so earlier, they would have been showing up for a funeral luncheon instead.

I mean Lazarus had been dead. Really dead. Wrapped up, slathered with spices to cover up his decaying odor, and placed in a tomb. God, at the time of his dying, had not helped him. More precisely, Jesus had not helped this good friend of his survive whatever sickness was proving fatal. And it's not like Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, hadn't got the word to Jesus. They sure had! But rather than rushing to Lazarus' side with one of his divinely patented healing miracles, what did Jesus do instead? He decided to stay put in the place where he was for a few more days. He didn't rush to Bethany to be with his buddy ... he could have, but he intentionally let Lazarus die. Why?

It's difficult to try and interpret such a choice. I don't believe there is one of us here who, if in the same position and possessing the same healing power, would have made this same choice. To interpret it well, we've got to get out of our own heads a bit and into the mind of the person telling this story, John. A big characteristic of the way

he writes Jesus' biography, is that he always has Jesus knowing more than those around him know. He consistently shows Jesus as someone who was, as preacher Tom Long has called it, "double-minded." In this case, John tells us that Jesus knew that things were going to turn out just fine for Lazarus, despite the fact that everyone else could only experience great grief.

To call the whole happening an "object lesson" sounds a bit crass, but it sort of was. The point being that just because it looks like God is failing you doesn't mean there isn't a fantastic turnaround just ahead. Jesus knew that all of his friends were going to have to watch him die. And he knew that even he was going to spend some time wondering if his Abba, God the Father, was going to turn all the shame and pain into resounding victory. But in his "double-mindedness," Jesus knew that darkness is light, death is life, grief is grace.

So when the dinner party guests brought themselves, it was no doubt with great joy that Jesus, the ever-honored guest, had not failed them after all. He'd made his way to Lazarus and poured out that healing power to bring him right back to life! The gift Lazarus brought and personally represented was the gift of hope.

Still, bear with me on this, can you imagine what he must have smelled like? The scent of days dead in a tomb. It's not like they had embalming fluid back then. Just some spices they hoped could cover up the stench. I'm not sure I've ever read that after he was resurrected he headed straight for a bath! This sounds a bit silly, I know. But it happens to be one of the possible explanations why his sister, Mary, brought an expensive perfume to the dinner party. It could have been so she could keep the company polite by perfuming her freshly undead brother.

Ah, but the gospel writer John doesn't say she poured it on her brother. No, she poured her dinner party gift upon Jesus, in whose honor was the party in the first place. And I'd say it safe to say it wasn't to deodorize him! Maybe, just maybe, it was because she was the only one able to understand that everything that happened to her brother was a sign of things to come for Jesus. Maybe she poured that perfume as an anointing, as an indicator that grave spices were about to be needed for another friend. Mary brought faithful foresight and genuine, trusting devotion to the dinner party. I believe this was so because this seems to be how John wants us to interpret her actions; especially in light of what Judas brought to the party.

Judas, that ominous betrayer waiting in the wings, brought a healthy dose of assumption to the dinner party. If Jesus indeed knew how the story was going to end and why on earth they had all really gathered to dine with an undead man, then Judas

proved to be clueless. He was the realist of the gang, especially since he was treasurer. The assumption he brought was that perfume is too expensive to waste on Jesus. Mary could have sold the perfume as a fundraiser to support their mission to the poor. Any foreshadowing of things to come ... perhaps including his own dark betrayal ... was lost on him. He was a bottom-line kind of guy. He assumed only what he could see. Curious, huh? Especially given that he'd just seen a man raised from the dead! For me, that alone would have held any assumptions about Jesus and the whole Jesus experience in check. Judas' concern for the poor and for good stewardship is worth applauding. But relying on your assumptions when dealing with someone like Jesus, who knows way more about what's ahead, isn't exactly the best model of discipleship. Especially since this happened to be the last dinner party Jesus would attend before bravely marching into Jerusalem with the weight of the world's sin on his back. Not to mention with Judas at his back.

If you think about it, this event in the tiny, reportedly beautiful village of Bethany just south of the Mount of Olives where Jesus waited and prayed for death and redemption, was less of a dinner party and really more of a worship service. And the gifts the guests brought were of greater significance than a simple bottle of wine or a side dish or some other socially polite token. They brought themselves ... along with their reactive assumptions, miraculous personal witness, and prophetic hopes.

It all begs the question ... what do we bring to worship? What do we bring to the dinner party every time we celebrate communion and every time in-between? How much of Judas' bent toward constant assumption do we bring? How much of Mary's clarity of vision despite what seems certain tragedy do we have to give? How much of Lazarus' witness to the amazing grace and power of God do we honestly offer against all odds?

As it was then, so we honor now. Jesus' walk to the cross is beginning. We'll have the fanfare of palm waving next Sunday. A day when we'll gift third graders with Adventure Bibles while considering what whether or not we modern day disciples are untying anything to help the Lord on his way. Then, on Maundy Thursday, at 7:30 p.m., we'll share a heartfelt last supper with the Lord. The day after that, on Friday at 11:30 a.m., we'll gather with our brothers and sisters next to the Califon post office to say that Christ has been crucified. Eventually we'll find our way up the hill at Fieldcrest Farm early Easter morning to find out what on earth, and in heaven, Jesus was up to during his thirty-three years of life with us. What to bring, what to bring ...

Amen.

