

**Stanford Memorial Church  
March 28, 2004**

**A LIFE OF SERVICE  
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**Gospel: John 12.1-8**

Mary appears to be one of the most significant women in the life of Jesus, and of course we have become more attuned to these women as a result of reading Dan Brown's current bestseller *The DiVinci Code*. This Mary of our gospel lesson is distinguished of course from Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as Mary Magdalene; and we know her as a result of three memorable encounters with Jesus. I would like to review them quickly, focusing especially in the interrelationship between the first and the third encounters.

The first recorded meeting between Jesus and Mary occurs in the gospel of Luke (chapter 10), and is familiar to us as the famous Mary and Martha story. On this occasion Martha appears to be the primary person, since we are informed that Jesus "entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home" (Luke 10.38). Almost as an after thought, we are told that she has a sister, Mary. Given the prominence of her visitor, it is not surprising that Martha, desiring to be the perfect, traditional hostess, immediately sets about the task of making her guest welcome: setting the table, cleaning up the house, ensuring a wonderful meal, maybe getting some flowers from the garden. She is described as being "distracted by many tasks," while—on the other hand--Mary sits at the feet of Jesus to listen to his teachings. Martha is fulfilling the role of the traditional housewife, while Mary is setting it aside for this unique opportunity. The domestic scene comes to head, however, when Martha exclaims to Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me" (Luke 10.40). And Jesus responds, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10.41). Taken in their context, these words sound pretty revolutionary. Not only does Jesus make the expected affirmation that spiritual nurture is far more important than meeting our physical needs, but his startling declaration liberates Mary from the kitchen, upending the traditional notion that the role of women is simply to wait upon men.

In the second and longest story, which may be briefly summarized, Mary and Martha are joined by their brother Lazarus who, unfortunately, has just died. In their pain and grief, they send for Jesus, and he is able to restore Lazarus to life.

This brings us to the third story in which Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover, and they stop at Bethany to have dinner with Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Torn between hope and apprehension, Jesus and the disciples have little way of anticipating how chaotic their next few days will become.

The very next day, after they left Bethany, Jesus will be welcomed by a throng of people, waving palm branches and calling out,

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel” (John 12.13).

But in less than a week, this triumphal entry would be followed by the crucifixion of Jesus.

But here, in Bethany, on the eve of the triumphal entry, Jesus and his disciples relish a wonderful meal and some quiet time with Lazarus, Martha and Mary. While they are sitting about the table, Mary performs a rather startling ritual. Taking “a pound of costly<sup>7</sup> perfume made of pure nard, (she) anoint(s) Jesus’ feet, and wipe(s) them with her hair” (John 12.3). This is an extraordinary act of serving on Mary’s part. The cost of the perfumed nard she shared would have been equivalent to a year’s annual wage. In serving Jesus in this way she recognized his uniqueness and the depth of her caring. Her caring gesture stands in sharp contrast to that of Judas who reacts to the action of Mary by making what is probably the most disingenuous comment in the entire Bible. When he exclaims, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money give to the poor” (John 12.5)? Judas spoke out of a sense of self-interest. He had no interest in the poor. He kept the common purse of the group and regularly stole money for himself. Moreover, in a few days he will betray Jesus to the authorities—and make more money for himself. He is just one more example of those who exploit the poor for their own personal gain.

In contrast to Judas’ self-serving behavior we have Mary as the embodiment of a life of faith, distinguished by the crucial interplay between listening and service. In the first story, Mary listens. In listening to Jesus her entire attention is fixed on his words, his presence, his being. She sets aside her own preoccupations, concerns and distractions. Beneath and within the words of Jesus she perceives and experiences the divine message and presence. Her actions call to mind the words of Paul Tillich when he wrote, “The first duty of love is to listen.”

Listening sounds so easy, but it is not. One of my greatest challenges as a teacher of chaplain residents is to help them discern and experience the difference between hearing and listening. Hearing may be able to repeat the words, but listening discerns that which is essential to the other person, the spiritual level of life, focusing on the core of one’s being, a sense of the divine presence. When we experience these transforming moments of listening within the hospital setting, it is not as though we bring God to the patient; rather the divine becomes unforgettably manifest as we listen and the other person becomes the sole object of our attention. Henri Nouwen described the true nature of listening when he wrote,

To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept. Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to

respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you. (*Bread for the Journey*, 1997)

Listening is important on our national and state levels as well. Our national leaders seem to be hearing voices across the nation crying, “We worship the idol of security . . . give us security . . . at any cost.” And the cost has been very great. So few seem to be listening to the voices crying out for health care needs, pointing out that one out of every six Americans has no health care coverage. Then there are the voices of education, pointing out the deterioration of our schools and the escalating of violence. Two weeks ago at Stanford Hospital we closed out Friday afternoon by having four chaplains involved in the Emergency Dept. because two young men had been shot. They were victims of gang warfare. A week earlier someone in the other gang had been shot and now they were retaliating. As the wounded boys were being treated, and one died, the police began looking for the identified killer, hoping to reach him before the other gang did—and more shooting ensued. How can we listen to these tragic stories and not hear the message that we must have better schools and community resources, to provide our young people with more productive pathways—to enrich them and our nation. On a state level our leaders seemed enchanted by voices that cry “no more taxes,” which has meant, among other things, the dismantling of one of the world’s great university systems. If only those voices could be heard, pointing out that we are in the process of loosing one of our greatest national and state assets . . . promising students, without financial resources, will no longer have the option of a quality education. We need to hear and recognize the truth expressed by Oliver Wendell Holmes when he said, “I like to pay taxes. With them I buy civilization.” And is there any greater investment than having one of the premiere universities in the world?

Such listening is extremely difficult and challenging, because we become so easily distracted and preoccupied with our needs, our concerns, our fears and our apprehensions. Mary is a model for setting aside our concerns, as we listen and focus on that which is ultimately meaningful—that enriches life for everyone. As she anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair, Mary also becomes a model for the way listening invariably finds an outlet through service. True listening calls forth our caring and service to others.

Like listening, service is also easily misunderstood and trivialized. After our entire cultural ideal is to be served, not to serve. Serving is often portrayed as a second-class way of life. Moreover, it is often confused with helping, of doing something. Rachel Remen, in her book *My Grandfather’s Blessing*, notes the importance of this distinction when she writes:

Many times when we help we do not really serve. Those who help see life differently from those who serve and may affect life differently as well. It is

hard not to see the person you are helping as someone weaker than yourself, someone more needy. When we help we become aware of our strength because we are using it. Others becomes aware of our strength as well and may feel diminished by it. But we do not serve with our strength; we serve with our selves. We draw from all our experiences . . . The wholeness of you is as worthy as the wholeness in me. Service is a relationship between equals.

Communicating this essential bond between listening and serving to chaplain residents is a continuing struggle. It is so much easier to say to a patient. “Let me know if there is anything I can do for you . . . Helping gives a sense of inner fulfillment. But when we serve, we bring the totality of our being—including our weaknesses, frailties and apprehensions. In serving the other person in this way we are acknowledging our common standing within the divine order. Each of us stands in need of God’s grace and healing. In sharing this reality, in serving one another, we sense the divine presence in our midst. Rachel Remen echoes these sentiments by saying:

When we serve, we see the unborn wholeness in others; we collaborate with it and strengthen it. Others may then be able to see their wholeness for themselves for the first time. . . All who serve, serve life. What we serve is something worthy of our attention, of the commitment of our time and our lives. Service is not about fixing life, outwitting life, manipulating life, controlling life, or struggling to gain mastery over life. When we serve, we discover that life is holy.”

*(My Grandfather’s Blessings, p. 198).*

Amen.