

Stanford Memorial Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent, 2007
Pr. Richard Foster

“TO LOVE AT ALL IS TO BE VULNERABLE”

I have borrowed from C. S. Lewis's FOUR LOVES for the sermon title. Somehow, it seems appropriate for the text of Jesus' "family" dinner at Bethany and the Nard Mary pours over him. It's titled: TO LOVE AT ALL IS TO BE VULNERABLE. I think it might resonate with you as well:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket---safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell. " par. 13, page 169

I come to this text today and I see a circle of love, each person here has an intimate relationship with Jesus of Nazareth. Being here for him is as close to coming home as he was offered in this world. Mary loved him as a beloved teacher and more. In him she saw God at work, reaching out to outcasts, sinners, people who were considered unlovable, and she felt that God through their friend and brother, Jesus, was reconciling and bringing together people broken from others or from themselves. There was in Jesus much to be loved by Mary. Had his

command “Lazarus, come out!”, not enlivened the dead brother? Two single sisters, Mary and Martha, needed the presence and power of a brother, Lazarus and, in a way, Jesus, who had made them his family of choice. Mary might have penned a verse of this poem:

“Time is where one starts from. As we grow older time becomes stranger; the pattern more complicated of dead and living. Not the intense moment isolated, with no before and after, but a life time burning in every moment..”

Judas loved Jesus; some say he was the beloved disciple. Elain Pagels and Karen Armstrong have written about the Gospel of Judas, an extra biblical essay attributed to Judas Iscariot. Whatever twists and turns the discoveries of Gnostic and other post-apostolic age documents might lead us on, one thing is clear: Judas belonged to the party of Zealots, a kind of insurgents’ group of people who sought in every way to drive out from their land the imperialist armies of pagan Rome. His attachment to Jesus was as the love of a protégé for a real revolutionary. Jesus would be the liberator of the people and assist them in the development of a free and sovereign country! He loved Jesus with his head, and as the head. But with his heart he could not leap to see the Messiah as a leader whose kingdom was not of this world, whose work would be work beyond the lost sheep of the house of suffering Israel. And Judas felt betrayed by this leader he thought he had understood. Only God could bring his head and heart together and that would be in death. Jesus might have penned the second stanza of the poem for his beloved and misled disciple, Judas and for us:

“And not the lifetime of one man only but of old stones that cannot be deciphered. There is time for the evening under starlight, a time for the evening under lamplight (the evening

with the photograph album).)Love is most nearly itself when here and now cease to matter”

Had Judas really listened and observed with his heart, he would have understood that this Messiah, Jesus the Christ, was anointed by God to reconcile the whole world to Godself. But, Judas did not, could not, see Jesus as the one for all the world's people, not just for the house of Israel. A pity for Judas, as for St. Exupery's Little Prince who was taught by the fox he wished to tame, "A person only sees well with the heart. That which is essential is invisible to the eyes"

And Lazarus, for whom Jesus wept when he heard of the death of his dearest friend and companion of the heart, There was a deep love for Jesus. Or at least there had been. Through the long illness and the untimely death, Lazarus had wandered in his mind's eye, the paths he had walked with Jesus. But he had to let him go. Lazarus had to let Martha and Mary, beloved sisters go. Lazarus had to let us all go. He died and was buried, with lament and weeping so characteristic of painful goodbyes in the Mideast to loved ones suddenly taken by death.

But the story tells us that Lazarus was raised up by the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. A 20th century German playwright, envisioned Lazarus after the fast in the grave, sitting alone in his room, not wanting to eat with his sisters, having come out to a deep anxiety and depression. For he had learned that "livin' is hard and dyin' is mean. So do a little lovin' in between", as Langston Hughes reminded us millennia later. And now he had to walk that lonesome valley again. Go into that darkness again. Die a second time. For Lazarus, Martha might have written another verse of our poem:

“Old men ought to be explorers. Here and there does not matter. We must be still and still moving into another intensity, for a further union, a deeper communion through the dark cold....”

And Martha, like Martha Stewart, knew that love takes the shape of a table, laden with beautiful things, delicious and served with the most splendid aspects of hospitality, both by the rich and those of us who have more everyday lives. St. Martha loved Jesus and probably begged Lazarus to prepare that succulent lamb for braising, for the Master was coming to dine. And for Martha he did it. And for Jesus. Martha got a bad rap for centuries. Jesus had chided her when she didn't sit at his feet and listen to his message about God. Mary had chosen the better part, he once had said. Yes, perhaps so. But as our student group The Episcopal Lutheran Campus Ministry calls it's Tuesday night meeting, “Bread and Belonging”, so belonging to one another has for Christians, a lot to do with sharing food.

It may be Leg of Lamb ala Boulangier, with Tabouli Salad, oven drip browned potatoes accompanied by fresh pita bread and hummous, babaganousch and some lovely olives and wine, or it might be a morsel of bread and a sip of wine or a dip in the wine, at the table of this family of God, and this meal is embraced with the new presence of Jesus our brother.

And like it or not, Martha makes it happen. She might have had her faults, as we all do, and mixed up some priorities, and I don't mean only Martha Stewart or St. Martha of

Bethany, but her gifts in the ministry of hospitality, have touched the church with the smell of coffee and tables laden with Lutheran jello and tuna casseroles to warm Garrison Keillor's heart. And who's to say that isn't the sweetest love of all?

Finally, all of it is about what God is doing and how we can respond in a love that works for us. God is reconciling the whole world. We can only participate in that by creating welcome tables for everyone. For Martha of Bethany then, the last stanza of Charles T. S. Elliot's poem, East Coker:

"The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters Of the petrel and the porpoise, In my end is my beginning."

And so they and we all are caught up in the loving and eternally reconciling work of God through the wandering, always merciful and loving Messiah, Jesus, their friend and brother, Ours!