

“GREAT WOMEN OF THE BIBLE -- MARY OF BETHANY”

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Mt. 8:20

One of the saddest things ever said about Jesus was spoken by the Savior himself,

“Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man hath
no place to lay his head.”

And he was right. From the moment he set foot in the river Jordan to be baptized of John and began, thereby, to be about his father’s business, Jesus was a stranger to the serenity and security we have come to associate with that place called -- home.

Following that act of obedience and set-apart-ness, Jesus was, in a very real sense, a wanderer. A nomad. A solitary figure whose life and soul were not his own. Jesus belonged to the people he had come to seek and to save. His mission was the redemption of mankind, and so noble and titanic a task as that left little room for self-comfort and self-care.

And yet, consisting of the same human stuff of which you and I are made, he had the same human need for quietness and comfort, relief and release from the exhausting clamor of life. Thus, the gospels record instance after instance when he retreated into the hills, or retired to the desert, or crossed over Galilee to the other side of the sea.

But these brief excursions into quietude could not really satisfy the human needs of this solitary wanderer. Jesus was not an antisocial recluse. Like you and me, he longed for the tender touch of a friendly human hand, and the warm, sweet sound of a friendly human voice. So he found great pleasure in being a frequent guest in the home of Mary and Martha.

It was here, in this home located in Bethany, a quiet little village on the road to Jericho just southeast of the Mount of Olives, that Jesus found a circle of love and understanding which provided shelter against the wild gusts of malice, and the angry waves of ambition and greed

which the fickle crowd often loosed upon him. Put simply, he was “at home” here. The hours spent in this blessed place were filled with that “fellowship of kindred minds, which is like to that above.” For here, in this little landlocked harbor of love, Jesus found the affection and acceptance for which he longed.

There Are No Stereotypical Saints

Because this rather well-to-do home was a favorite haunt of Jesus, it is a matter of great interest to know something about the people who lived there. As far as Lazarus, the man of the house is concerned, we know very little about him beyond the fact that following the untimely death of Lazarus, Jesus brought him back to life again.

On the other hand, the character and characteristics of Mary and Martha, the two sisters, are quite clearly drawn. As Edith Deen points out in her masterpiece, All The Women Of The Bible, we know “they were as different as night and day, as diverse in disposition as Esau and Jacob.”

Martha, the older sister, was a busy, practical person. Mary was quiet and contemplative.

Martha provides the businesslike “meat and potatoes” prose of the story. Mary supplies the poetry.

Martha was concerned about “the vegetables in life’s garden.” Mary gave her attention to “its flowers.”

And Jesus had great love and respect for *both of them*.

That reality suggests two things to me. The one we have just seen, there are no stereotypical saints so the drive toward conformity is misplaced. And second, perfection is not required to be on intimate terms with our Lord. Let’s look at *that* wonderful reality for a moment.

Perfection Is Not Required

Neither of these women was the epitome of perfection. Jesus could easily have wished for a bit more of Mary in Martha, and a bit more of Martha in Mary.

A combination of the two of them -- Mary's meditation and Martha's dedication, Mary's worship and Martha's service -- would seem to provide a full-orbed faith. But Jesus loved them both *just as they were*, even while he worked to help them become what they were meant to be. Our purpose is not to judge them, but to learn from them so *our* lives, like theirs, might be made more to the liking of our Lord.

The splendid qualities of Mary, the more mystical of the two, are clearly revealed in three beautiful vignettes briefly, but unforgettably sketched for us by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Mary the Learner

The first of these vignettes directs our attention to Jesus who had stopped off at this favorite retreat on his way to Jerusalem. Seizing the opportunity, Mary seats herself at the feet of Jesus and is soon lost in the wonder of his words, as with quiet eloquence he tells her of life as God intended it to be.

As she sits there in rapt attention, her eyes reflecting the joy and glory of these blessed truths, Mary comes to realize she must not only learn *from* him, but *of* him. She begins to understand that Jesus *himself* is “the way” about which he has been speaking. That,

“Christ is not merely a truth to be believed, but a way to be trodden, a life to be lived” (Hastings Commentary).

She hears the truth *from* Him, but she also sees the truth *in* Him, and from that moment on her life is never the same.

We don't know how long Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, but it was long enough. Later, when Martha expresses impatience at her sister's lack of interest in serving Jesus, Mary offers no defense. Any need to justify herself, any quick human reaction to her sister's criticism, any need to tell her side of the story, has been dissipated by these moments in the presence of her Lord.

Perhaps, as someone has suggested, she has been listening so intently to what Jesus said, she does

not hear Martha when she speaks, but either way, the presence of Jesus has its affect. Having sat in the company of Christ, Mary sees her circumstances with a clearer eye. She has gained what we might call *perspective*. She now knows how to master, instead of be mastered by, the “sudden irritations and sullen situations” of life.

Is that not what we need to learn? Is it not true we need to sit with Mary at the feet of Jesus until we, too, get life in true perspective? Until we, too, come to see that when compared with the great things of God, the little complaints and supposed slights, which otherwise loom so large, are not worthy of our attention!

Do we not also need to learn, as Mary did, the secret of simplifying life? Mary wasn't lazy. She was simply more busy *internally* than she was externally. As a result, she sensed that while many things were *helpful*, one thing was *needful*. She knew intuitively that time spent with Jesus was not wasted, but would actually result in greater and wiser productivity.

By making the most of every opportunity to learn *from* and *of* her Lord, Mary discovered she was better off than had she engaged in a frenzied flurry of activity which required that she neglect “the top side of her soul.”

This is an art we, too, need to develop. One of the most difficult problems confronting us today is to balance this whirling, busy, extroverted world into which we have been thrust, with some kind of “perspective-giving” quietness and thought. From the moment we set foot out of bed in the morning, we are beset by a wild, harsh din of noise.

As William Fadiman puts it,

“In the home there is the gloating gurgle of the coffee maker, the raucous thumping of the washing machine, the triumphant whirl of the kitchen mixer, and the plaintive pop of the electric toaster.

In the office there is the jarring jangle of the telephone, the strangled squawk of the

office intercom, the shrill whirl of the pencil sharpener and the fizzing hiss of the fluorescent bulbs.

In the shop there is the grinding roar of the buzz saw, the vibrant rumble of the giant presses, the moaning murmur of the turret lathe and the clattering quiver of the assembly line.

Even when we seek the balm of soundless sleep at the close of day, our battered nerves are further bruised by the diabolical purr of the electric blanket.”

Our lives are so filled with frantic sound and feverish activity there is rarely room to rest, and in quiet mediation on the things of God, pull ourselves together.

A. W. Tozer says so well,

“There is no way we can turn the clock back to quieter times. There is no place we can hide from the persistent clamor of the 20th century. We must somehow learn to live in such a world as this and be victorious over it.”

Mary of Bethany points the way. She simplified life by finding *the one thing needful*, which she identified as continued communion with Christ. And, if like Mary, we learn to simplify life and find, or better yet *make* time, for fellowship at the feet of Jesus, then, like Mary, we will learn to master our circumstances rather than be mastered by them.

“Lord, what a change one short hour
Spent in thy presence will avail to make.
What heavy burdens from our spirits take.
What parched grounds refreshed as with a shower.
We kneel, how weak, we rise, how full of power!”

Then along with Mary the learner, there is --

Mary the Mourner

The second vignette casting light on this great woman of the Bible is found in John 11. It records

one of those swift, unexpected calamities which sometimes strike the children of God.

Lazarus is dead. Mary, as well as Martha, is heartbroken as a result of the loss. In anguish and distress her thoughts turn to the One who can help her. If only Jesus had been there, he could have healed Lazarus and her brother would not have died. But Jesus was occupied elsewhere, and when he arrives, it is too late. The funeral is over. Lazarus is buried.

When Mary sees Jesus she flings herself at his feet, her eyes are full of tears. The sight of those tears, together with memories of happier days when sweet fellowship with this family had been a balm to his weary soul, fill Jesus' heart with sadness and he, too, begins to weep.

But, thank God, Jesus does not weep for long! Nor does Mary! After praying, Christ issues the breathtaking command, “Lazarus, come forth!” And he that was dead *came* forth, “bound hand and foot with graveclothes.” Death, the king of terrors and the terror of Kings, gave back its prey. Lazarus was raised up in the glory and gladness of a resurrected life.

We are left to imagine the ecstasy Mary knew at that moment, for nothing more is said of her just then. But one thing *is* sure, she whose sorrow led to Jesus' feet, was comforted as he, who is the resurrection and the life, brought peace to her troubled heart.

It may be, dear heart that you, as I have, have had the dagger of sorrow driven into your heart. That you, too, have stood at a grave side, and with Mary have longed for a miracle. But, in your case, as in mine, there has been no commanding voice calling back to life the one whom death had claimed. And you have wondered, as I have, is Christ *still* the resurrection and the life?

Yes! Yes! A thousand times, Yes!! For now, through the power of his resurrection, Christ does for you and me something far greater than he did for Mary and Martha. Unlike Lazarus, who was resurrected only to later experience death a second time, through Christ *our* beloved are “absent from the body” and *immediately* “present with the Lord” *to never know death again!*

Do you say, “I know it’s well with *them*, but what about me and my present sorrow?” May I ask you to look around this sanctuary. Your gaze will fall on the faces of many who met grief when it came to them, as Mary did when it came to *her*. *They* laid it at the feet of Jesus! And though they wept, as Mary wept, they learned as Mary learned,

“Earth has no sorrows that heaven cannot heal.”

What Jesus did for Mary he will do for you, if, with Mary, you take your burden to the Lord *and leave it there*. Mary the learner. Mary the mourner. And then there was --

Mary the Worshiper

The third scene in which Mary figures prominently is at the last feast in Bethany, a few days before Jesus died. The disciples have joined their Lord around the table, and as usual, Martha is busy serving.

Mary helps, but somehow she seems to know good food and gracious surroundings are not an adequate expression of the gratitude she feels for all Jesus. He has come to mean so much to her through the hours spent at his feet. Through the miracle of her brother’s return to life.

In an urgent and innocent impulse of guileless love, Mary arises from the table, goes to her room, and returns with an alabaster box into which she has placed precious oils and ointments. As a symbol of her intense love for Jesus, Mary breaks the box and anoints his feet with her hair.

Judas, knowing the great value of these ointments, begins to criticize such lavish generosity, even if it *is* expended on Jesus. The contents should have been sold, he argues, and the money given to the poor. Jesus defends her by saying.

“The poor you have with you always, and whenever ye will you may do good to them, but me ye have not always.”

He does not deny it was a lavish and impulsive thing to do. He simply says it was a beautiful thing to do. It was an expression of the kind of unrestrained, unmeasured, uninhibited love he so deeply desires from his disciples.

“She hath done *what she could*,” he says, and in so speaking, he acknowledges the fact that in her gracious gift he sees evidence of a far greater gift. Indeed, it is the greatest gift of all, *herself*, and this he receives with gratitude.

Many things might be said of this third vignette, let me mention just two,

“Seize life’s opportunity when it comes.” And --

“Do *what* you can for Jesus, *when* you can do it.”

Seize Life’s Opportunity When it Comes

There is an ancient proverb which says there are three things which never return. The spent arrow. The spoken word. The lost opportunity. Aware of this, Mary seized her opportunity to do for Jesus what *she* could do. Because she had spent so much time in listening to the Lord, *really listening* with the inner ear of the spirit, Mary knew opportunities differ in value and importance. She also knew *wisdom* lies in doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reason.

“The poor you have with you always,” said Jesus, “but me ye have not always.” He was saying certain things can be done *any* time, but other things must be done *now*, or never!

Our generation desperately needs to learn that lesson. We need to reckon with the fact that while *God* may have all eternity in which to work out his great plan of the ages, *we don’t!* We have a brief threescore years and ten, maybe less, rarely more. Therefore *now* is the accepted time. *Now* is the hour of our opportunity, and therefore our responsibility. We must act *now*, or never.

With all eternity to spend in heaven, we had better use these few years on earth, thinking less of ourselves and more of our Savior.

Do What You Can for Jesus, When You Can Do It

We need to seize opportunity when it comes and then, with Mary, we also need to learn to do

what we can do for Christ, *when* we can do it. It was a small thing for her to break an alabaster box and anoint the feet of Jesus with the tresses of her hair. But it was what she *could* do, and because she *did* it, she won our Lord's undying love, and history's accolades.

Jesus did not judge her by what someone else might have done. Nor will he judge you by the capacity of others. His evaluation is based on *your* possibilities, not theirs. You will not be judged by what you do compared with what others have done, and that's the fairness of it. You will be judged by what you do, *compared with what you might have done*, and that's the fineness of it.

To be sure,

“There *is* a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea.
There is a kindness in his justice
Which is more than liberty.”

But you must not misjudge that mercy, and think you are free to do what you *feel* like doing.

By God's grace you are free to do what you *can* do for Jesus' sake. Nothing more, nothing less. And when, like Mary, you do what you *can* for Christ in *love*, he sees in that act evidence of the greatest gift of all. The gift of *yourself*. And he is pleased.

“Laid on thy altar, O my Lord divine,
Accept my gift this day, for Jesus' sake.
I have no jewels to adorn thy shrine,
Nor any world-famed sacrifice to make.
But here I bring, within these trembling hands,
This will of mine. A gift that seemeth small.
But thou dost know, dear Lord,
That when I give thee this, I give thee all.”