

Sermon for Sunday, August 23, 2009
Dr. Dan Doriani

WAR OR PEACE
John 11:47-53, 12:1-8

1. Jesus gives life to the dead. Context: the healing of Lazarus

One day, when Jesus was in northern Israel, in Galilee, he heard that his friend Lazarus was sick. Lazarus had two sisters, Mary and Martha (Luke 10). The three lived in one home and were disciples of Jesus. One day Jesus and his disciples stopped by their home when they were traveling near Jerusalem. Luke stresses the role of the sisters: Martha wearing herself out to prepare a proper meal, while Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening and learning. As Martha served and Mary listened, both women showed their devotion to Jesus. In John 11, we learn that Jesus was also close to their brother Lazarus.

In fact, Lazarus was very sick – sick enough for the sisters to send a messenger who had to walk several days just to reach Jesus and tell him (11:3).

Jesus seems unconcerned. As much he loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus, "he stayed where he was two more days." He explained, "This sickness will not end in death." No, the illness came for God's glory. Several days later, Jesus told his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea" (11:7).

The disciples were concerned. Recent trips to Judea had led threats on Jesus' life. Rabbis and priests in the south viewed Jesus as a law-breaker and deceiver. Twice some had started to stone him (8:59, 10:31). Why risk danger by going back?

Jesus replies that he is still in the daylight hours of his ministry. His work isn't finished. As long as God's light directs him, he can and should continue to work (11:9-10). This, of course, is true for all of us. The point: Don't conform to popular judgment about when to work and when to rest, what is and what isn't safe. If God is your light, it may be right to work after midnight or to rise at 4:00 a.m. It is right to tackle a dangerous project if God calls you to it. In war zones, someone has to defuse bombs. Someone is called to defuse bombs - literally and metaphorically. We shouldn't volunteer for trouble if it's not our call. But we shouldn't decline if it is.

So Jesus goes back to Judea where there are bombs in the road. He tells the disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." His disciples reply, "If he is asleep, he will wake up" (11:11-12). No need to go!

No, Jesus explains. "Lazarus is dead. But let us go to him." (11:14-15). And the disciples went with him even though they thought it might cost them their lives. Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16).

By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days, which means he had been dead for five. A great many people had come to comfort Mary and Martha in their loss. They became witnesses to Jesus' miracle (11:17-19).

But before Jesus even reached the house, Martha, ever the activist, "went out to meet him" (11:20). She said, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask" (11:21-22). That is, she believes Jesus can raise her brother up if he wishes. He can heal everything, everyone. Yes he can... but will he?

Jesus continued to talk. He tells Martha her brother "will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (11:23-24). Martha knows God has that power. He promised to restore his people to the new heaven and new earth.

This is true and important. It's immensely comforting, not as an idea, but as a promise to all who face the death of family or friend, even their own death. But Martha wants more: If Jesus wills it, her brother can and will rise now.

Jesus does indeed have this power. Not as the prophets and apostles do, through prayer to the Father. He has it in himself. He says: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (11:25-26).

Two points: First, He will be God's agent in raising the dead on the last day. Second, those who believe in Jesus never die. Physical death is not final death.

Martha believes the doctrine and trusts the person: "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." Into this world means into this broken sphere, into this tangible place where we live. Mary believed it, too, as did Nicodemus when Jesus raised him from the dead. How did it happen?

- After Jesus visited the tomb and wept at the heartache of the family and the wretchedness of death (11:31-35).
- Before a number of people – some of whom criticized Jesus for failing to arrive in time to prevent the death (11:33-37).
- After Lazarus had been in the tomb for days; long enough for people to hesitate when Jesus commanded people to remove the stone (11:38-39).
- With a voice of command, "Lazarus come forth" so that Lazarus did come forth, grave cloths streaming behind him.

As a result, "many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary [and Martha] put their faith in him." But others were less impressed. They told certain Pharisees, who told the chief priests. And they called a meeting (11:45-47).

2. Jesus' power frightens people – they want to arrest him (11:47-53)

The stir caused by the resurrection of Lazarus leads the high priests and Pharisees to convene a meeting of Sanhedrin. The question: What are we doing about this – this resurrection, this devotion to Jesus because of his signs? (11:47).

The first group is worried. If we don't stop him, everyone will believe in him. They will lose their "place." We think of their position as leaders, but "the place" was a circumlocution for the temple. They are afraid selfishly, but they also foresee that the adoration of Jesus will lead to a Messianic movement.

The Romans – who occupied Israel at the time and gave substantial freedom as long as they stayed quiet - will see it as a threat and come in force. Their freedom, their religious way of life could be destroyed. So we see selfish concerns and altruistic concern for the nation (11:48).

But the group is at a loss until Caiaphas, the high priest speaks up. He is worried as well, but this high priest led the Sanhedrin, which was roughly the Senate, White House, Supreme Court and church council rolled together. Caiaphas was a political operative. He understood power and used it ruthlessly to accomplish his goals.

Caiaphas lived for power, but God saw his office as high priest. God ordained that he play the priest's role as God's teacher. His first word is extremely rude. "You don't know nothing" (11:49). He sets everyone straight. It's expedient, better, "for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

Caiaphas means: Jesus should be murdered, judicially, so the nation has peace. This episode warns us to watch our language. A brutal heart produces brutal speech. Brutal thoughts lead to brutal speech, which leads to brutal acts. Watch your heart and watch your speech, which is a barometer of the heart.

You hear: It's better... "that one man die for the people." Caiaphas means that Jesus should be murdered, judicially, so the nation stays peaceful. But John wants us to see full Christian meaning. Jesus will die, literally on behalf of the people (λαον), in the place of the nation (εἰς τὸν λαόν).

The Sanhedrin resolved the matter in principle that day. They deliberated, resolved and planned his death. They commanded (pluperfect) that if anyone knew where Jesus might be, they should make it known, give the report.

The encounter with greatness always calls forth a response. A great politician: assist or oppose. A great athlete: on your team or a plan to stop him. The Sanhedrin perceived a rival and declared war: We must stop him. Mary and Martha saw a friend. They devoted themselves to him. What have you done?

3. Jesus stirs strong devotion – Mary's costly gift

Once the Sanhedrin resolved to kill him, Jesus withdrew. He "no longer moved about publicly... Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert" (11:54). But the Passover was coming. Everyone expected Jesus to come and he wanted to attend – for his own reasons. He knew this would be his last Passover, the hour when he finished his work. So he came, even though the chief priests and Pharisees of the Sanhedrin had given orders to arrest him (11:55-57).

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, a town just two miles southeast of Jerusalem. The Greek, "They prepared a dinner" could be various townspeople or Mary, Martha and Lazarus, the man Jesus had raised from the dead. We would expect the sisters, Mary and Martha to join Jesus and Lazarus at the table, but they had other plans.

Martha served the meal. She had served a meal to Jesus and the disciples before, so perhaps she was good at this. The meal was her gift.

Mary planned her gift too. Mary bought "a pint [12 ounces] of pure nard" (12:30). Nard was one of the most expensive spices/perfumes in the world. It cost about \$1,000 per ounce in today's terms. The jar was made of alabaster, carved stone, tapering to a thin neck. Mary broke the neck of the vial and poured all the perfume on Jesus. The value was worth 300 denarii – about a year's wages for a laborer (12:5). When Mary anointed Jesus, she showed that he was worth all she had. The aroma filled the room; moments later complaints followed.

The disciples – but especially Judas Iscariot - were indignant. "Why this waste? This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor" (12:4-5, Matthew 26:8-9).

The value was certainly high. But let's pin down the reason for the objection. First, the disciples simply didn't have much money. The twelve could have lived for a month on what she spent in one moment. Second, if she had so much money, she should give it to the poor.

But again, Judas led the complaint. Judas was a thief - he kept their common purse and "used to take what was put into it" (John 12:6 RSV¹, NIV²). ESV³ paraphrase, "he used to help himself." Judas thought of pilfering the money. He cared little for the poor. He simply wanted to look pious.

¹ Revised Standard Version

² New International Version

³ English Standard Version

Above all, the disciples didn't understand the hour. They still thought one day was the same as another. But Jesus knew he would die soon. So did Mary - Jesus described his imminent death.

In the Old Testament, kings and prophets are anointed. Jesus deserved to be anointed for that reason - The Messiah is God's anointed. Even more, Mary anointed Jesus in anticipation of his death. A proper burial was a quick 24 hours, publicly lamented and perfumed. Mary sensed, correctly, that Jesus might not receive a proper burial. So she perfumed him in advance. Lavishly!

Judas called it a waste, but Jesus defended her: "She did a beautiful thing. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial" (Matthew 26:10-12).

Mary showed that "she understood what he was about to do and loved him for it." She knew because she listened. When Jesus first came to her house, Mary listened "at Jesus' feet" (Luke 10:39). When Lazarus died, she fell at his feet again (John 11:32). To sit at someone's feet is to take the posture of a disciple. She listened, therefore she knew: Jesus must go to the cross and die there. Therefore, his body must be anointed. Mary is doing it now, in case she cannot do it later.

A simple lesson: Listen to Jesus in the pages of Scripture. Listen to him.

A word about the poor. Jesus said, "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" (12:8). When Jesus says this, he doesn't mean poverty is a hopeless problem that defies remedy. We must not say, "If there will always be poor people, why try to help them?"

Jesus is paraphrasing Moses: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:11). In fact, Moses promised that if Israel was faithful, there would be no poor in the land (Deuteronomy 15:4). Sin causes poverty:

- Some are poor due to their own sin, such as drug or alcohol abuse, gambling, or failure to come to work.
- Others are poor because of personal connection to a sinner. Perhaps a spouse gambled or used drugs.
- Others are poor because they can't find work. Back then some social structures made it hard to find work. Some do it now, too. Good workers get fired.

So then, all poverty is caused by sin. But in a particular case, it may be that the poor sinned. Or perhaps someone sinned against them. Therefore, if we do see a brother who is poor, the Lord says, "do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother" (Deuteronomy 15:7). Be generous. The law does not recommend handouts as the first option. It recommends forgivable loans. God urges that the poor be given work to do: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field. Leave them for the poor" (Leviticus 23:22).

Jesus was certainly generous to the poor. He fed them and healed them. Poverty is neither an insignificant nor hopeless cause. God's cares for the poor and we should too.

Yet as Jesus' death approaches, it is time to lay aside our duty to the poor. This is a unique moment, unparalleled in the history of the universe. Mary was right to give Jesus an extravagant gift right before his death. Custom (which Jesus' disciples later refused to follow) said an executed criminal cannot expect a proper burial with a proper anointing. Mary had saved up for this hour and now anoints Jesus, in advance, for his burial. Jesus deserved this honor. The incarnate Son of God would soon finish his days on earth. The poor would always be present, but he would not. Mary was thanking Jesus in advance for giving his life for her. She gave a great gift, at a unique moment, to a unique person.

The Spirit of Mary's act

Let's review events. First, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Second, there are many witnesses and many of them believe. Third, the Sanhedrin is concerned: Jesus is making too many converts. The people may call him Messiah, cause an uproar, and crush the movement. Then we will lose our place. Fourth, therefore kill him!

Fifth, Jesus withdraws for a while. But sixth, when Martha and Mary host a banquet in his honor, he returns. Seventh, Martha feeds everyone. Eighth, Mary anoints Jesus. This is the high point of the event. We do well to consider it well.

Mary used the equivalent of over \$10,000 on this perfume for Jesus. This was possibly her life's savings. She poured it out at once, on Jesus' feet.

Why his feet? It was normal to anoint the head first. People reclined at table, low tables, with head and arms in, legs and feet out. So as Mary approached, she came to his feet first. Perhaps she anointed feet because she felt "unworthy." Perhaps because she was overwhelmed and could go no further.

At any rate, the perfume went on his feet and she began to wipe his feet or wipe up his feet with her hair.

Truly remarkable - she wiped it up or wiped it in with her hair. Respectable women never let their hair down in public. A rough parallel would be to wear a bikini to formal dinner party or preaching in a muscle shirt. What is she thinking?

Mary was thinking, but not about that. She was forgetting herself and thinking about Jesus. People criticized her extravagance, her lack of restraint. But Jesus said, "She has done a beautiful thing." (Matthew 26:10). The beauty was her devotion to Christ, her act of self-forgetful devotion – at the right moment.

The Bible says we should make "the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16) As the Lord showed Mary, may he show us singular opportunities to do small things that make a big difference. May we seize these opportunities. It is not simply a continuum. One day, one moment is not the same as another. On occasion, a choice, an act, is "now or never."

There was a family with small children that suffered illness upon illness, with the mother the most sick of all. Slowly their needs piled up. Someone who knew the family only a little found out and drove to their home and knocked. She stood on doorstep: "What can I do to help you? Prepare a meal?" "That's covered." "Watch your children?" "That's covered." "I could wash your clothes." The mother paused. It would help, but you know, she would see their dirty and personal and ripped old clothing. The woman understood. "My clothes aren't perfect either. Let me help you."

Mary's act is like that, yet more: This is an act of the will and the emotions. Wiping feet surely because she fell to his feet, overwhelmed by love. Emotions aren't something that just happens to us. They are based on our convictions, the way we interpret the world. She believed Jesus is worth her supreme devotion. She acted on it. She felt it. As should we.

A little later Jesus added, "Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her (Matthew 26:13). The story will always be evidence of the love and devotion Jesus evokes.

In the next scene, leaders hear about the banquet. The banquet – and the presence of Lazarus - was a public event. Many saw him and more believed. This stirred the authority's wrath more than ever, to the point that they planned to kill Lazarus as well (John 12:11).

Lay aside the question of the cruelty and brutality of that. It failed. Look at the other side. Lazarus lived and remained living evidence of Jesus' work. Mary's sacrifice has been told throughout the world. She has become evidence of the beauty of discipleship.

The question: Are you evidence for Christ? How? Start by listening to people better. See what is excellent in them. Label it, learn from it, tell them about it. Be kind to people in need. When you are in need, be quick to pray and slow to worry.

Live less for the approval of men and women, more for the approval of God. I have a friend who preaches once a month in an Evangelical Lutheran church. This week, that denomination voted that practicing homosexuals can be ordained as pastors. His church is shattered. This is his week to preach and he learned late yesterday that a major TV station will be there to cover it. If he speaks to his people, seeking to be faithful to the Lord and ignores the TV crew, he can be a witness for the Lord. May we lay aside the instinct for self-preservation.

Above all, our hearts need to be right with the Lord. John presents a choice that could hardly be more clear. Where do you stand?

The theme of John 11-12 is a choice: The leaders wage war against Jesus to get their way. The chief priest said Jesus is worth more dead than alive. Not because he's a criminal, but because he is too good. He attracts a following. That could disrupt their system, their leadership. They will slay an innocent man to keep their place.

Mary makes peace with Jesus. She listens, she learns. She spends her wealth and sacrifices to love and honor him.

What about you? Is it war or peace? If it's peace, how does it show? What do you do to show the Lord's worth?