

“Finding Strength among Family and Friends”
April 6, 2025

John 12:1-8

“Jesus came to Bethany, and there they gave a dinner for him.”

After yet another tumultuous week, one that included the firing of the head of the National Security Agency and several national security officials on the urging of a conspiracy theorist, along with, of course, the crash of the stock market after the President slapped the world with tariffs based on what *Forbes* called a “fake” and “incredibly stupid” formula, leading some to conclude he “kind of made this up as he went along,” all of this moving us closer to what has been described as “the end of the American age,” why would we be thinking about a long-ago dinner in Bethany?

Because in just such occasions, we might find the strength that we need for the living of these days.

There are many sermons that could be preached from this text. But it is the community and the meal that is of import for us today.

The stories we tell of Jesus so often center on meals.

We remember the meal he shared with his disciples on the night of his arrest.

We remember Jesus telling Zaccheaus the tax collector: “Get down from that tree. I’m going to your house,” where they then ate together. We remember that by eating with tax collectors and other “sinners” Jesus made the people of his day quite angry.

And we remember that story of the meal in Bethany at the home of Lazarus.

The Gospel of John tells the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. “I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus said to those present.

Then he shouted toward the stone tomb: “Lazarus, come out.”

At that command, Lazarus did just that. “The dead man came out,” John’s Gospel tells us, “his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.”

Some time later, the one who had died and the One who was to die sat together at a table. It was, in some sense, a feast of the resurrection. That dinner pointed ahead to the meal that we share in this space.

Whenever Jesus sits at table with other people something wonderful happens.

Martha serves. John seems to mention this only in passing. But instead of rushing on, let us linger over the wonder of Martha’s service. The grace of hospitality and the gift of welcome are two of the great delights of living. Consider times when you have been welcomed. Gracious people make you feel at home in their home, comfortable and relaxed. Recall those times when you have been privileged to extend hospitality to others. You share what is yours with someone else, and both of you are enriched in the process.

Something wonderful happens.

Martha serves. Her hospitality provides the setting in which everything else in this story might unfold. Martha gives to all of us a model of how we might live our lives.

Then Mary walks onto the scene. She pours perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. The fragrant scent fills the room. It is a beautiful gesture. It is an extravagant gesture—literally one that “goes beyond the bounds,” beyond all reasonable limits.

This gesture speaks to something deep inside us.

We long to do something great for God.

We sense that God calls out the best within us—which might seem excessive to others, maybe even to ourselves.

We hope that when we act out of an abundant heart great things can happen.

In this story of hospitality and extravagance we see the importance of relationships. When Jesus affirms, heals, and restores people, he usually does not do so in private. He acts out in the open, among friends and family.

Connections between people, a gathering of friends, a meal shared—these are small things, but of great importance and value in these days.

In his book, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Timothy Snyder offers #12—Make eye contact and small talk. That doesn't seem like much in the face of the destruction and nihilism we see in these days. Eye contact and small talk. Simple human connection.

Snyder tells us: “Tyrannical regimes arose at different times and places in the Europe of the twentieth century, but memoirs of their victims all share a single tender moment. ...people who were living in fear of repression remembered how their neighbors treated them. A smile, a handshake, or a word of greeting—banal gestures in a normal situation—took on great significance.”

He concludes: “You might not be sure, today or tomorrow, who feels threatened in the United States. But if you affirm everyone, you can be sure that certain people will feel better. In the most dangerous of times, those who escape and survive generally know people whom they can trust. Having old friends is the politics of last resort. And making new ones is the first step toward change.”

Friendships. Family. Strength.

We saw this on Iowa Avenue and around the country yesterday.

The stories we tell of meals and community remind us of the important place of human bonds, as in these days we continue the work of prizing our rights and maintaining our liberties. Growing authoritarianism does what it can to weaken those connections.

Consider the increasing vaccine skepticism coming out of the Department of Health and Human Services as cases of measles grow.

Margaret Renkl is 63 years old. She recently got a measles vaccine, saying: “My own safety wasn’t my chief concern. Doing everything I can to protect my fellow human beings who cannot be vaccinated — babies too young for the vaccine, people with compromised immune systems, people who are allergic to the components of the vaccine — seems to me to be the only moral thing to do for anyone living in close community with other people. And that’s almost all of us.”

She adds, “Community is a concept that the MAGA movement is working overtime to undo, but human beings are a social species. We depend on one another for safety and survival. When we vaccinate our children, we are keeping them safe, but we are also keeping those who cannot be vaccinated safe. It’s part of the social contract.”

She concludes: “To be in community is to recognize that we all, whoever we are, whatever we may believe, have an obligation to support and protect one another, to work together to create a society that is safe for everyone, including our most vulnerable neighbors.”¹

New or old, deep or on the surface, the connections of friends and family are a vital source of strength. And that may be why breaking those bonds seems to be so important.

You probably know this story:

CNN reported that a Maryland mother recently received two calls: One was from her husband, who said he had been pulled over after finishing his construction shift. The other was from Homeland Security, telling her she had just 10 minutes to pick up the couple’s 5-year-old son who was in the car with her husband.

Jennifer Sura raced to her husband’s side to hurriedly place their crying child in a car seat and say goodbye to her husband as he also wept.

“If you are strong, I will be strong,” were the last words he said.

Kilmar Garcia’s was arrested and deported to the notorious prison in El Salvador. The Administration says it was a mistake, but they seem unlikely to follow the court order to have Garcia returned to the United States no later than 11:59 p.m. on Monday.²

In your anger or despair over the injustice of this situation, do not miss the calculated attempt to break the bonds of friends and family and community.

And remember: there are times in our lives when we are called out of ourselves, out of a preoccupation with our immediate wants and needs, caught up into something far greater.

There are times when as individuals—and as a congregation—we do far more than we might have expected, we give far more than we might have expected. We are pulled out of our usual ways, giving less thought to ourselves and more thought toward others.

This kind of experience is the experience of abundance that we discover in relationships and community—surrounded by all that we need and then some. It is the experience of giving—of being pulled out of oneself, beyond oneself, beyond what is usual.

These are moments of grace—given by God so that we can enjoy them and find strength in them. These experiences are a window onto the abundance of God.

And this is just what we see when Jesus eats with friends in Bethany.

I don't, of course, want to romanticize all of this, suggesting that meals with friends and family are always easy. The polarization of our nation is deep and has made friendships difficult and strained relationships in families. Recently, several people have told me just how difficult it is to be with family or old friends who now see the world differently than they do. Sometime those dinner guests aren't necessarily the ones we would prefer.

Still, it is among friends and family, sometimes even among difficult friends and family that we might find the strength we need. Those relationships are the source of power.

When Jesus comes to Bethany, we know that he is soon to meet his death. And while we know that the ultimate outcome is victory over the grave, for the disciples and for us, death is death, with all the dread and sorrow and separation that the word implies.

Mary seems to understand this. She loves Jesus now, not as the one who will conquer the grave, but simply as the one who will die. She pours out her love for Jesus today because he may not be with her tomorrow. Death is ugly and strong.

Mary's actions point toward another reality—that love is stronger than death. Love always creates something new out of destruction. Mary's reckless act of pouring out expensive perfume and wiping Jesus' feet with her hair shows genuine human love—love that is not measured out, love that overflows.

Extravagant love will find support from the Christ we follow.

In community with one another, among friends and family, we will find the strength to do big things, extravagant things. In community we will discover the power of God's love, which is stronger than death, given freely, without measure, to us.

Don't give up for Lent. Find strength.

¹ Margaret Renkl, Why I Got the Measles Vaccine at Age 63, NY Times, March 24, 2025
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/24/opinion/measles-vaccine-babies.html>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/04/us/maryland-father-el-salvador-immigrants/index.html>