



PARTY ON!

March 13, 2016, The Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12: 1-7

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Theme: Even surrounded by death, we celebrate life... together.

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*God of costly and extravagant grace, open our ears, our minds, our hearts to your ancient truth in Holy Scripture. May we attend closely to the word we've heard read, in all its devastating loveliness. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

I've presided at a run of funerals over the last week or so, memorial services actually. I had one yesterday and one last weekend. They always seem to come in clumps. Though I must say that one of the blessings of ministry here at Brick Church is that I get to do way more baptisms than funerals. That's unusual; I love it.

There've been times in my ministry when I've conducted half a dozen funerals in a month. When that happens, I'm just introspective enough that I watch my internal response when dealing with a lot of death in a short period of time. I think the reaction I see in myself is pretty normal. My response is twofold. First, I'm sobered and saddened. Often, I've known and loved the person at whose funeral I preside. I believe it's the minister's job not to lose it at the funeral. I preached my own father's service a year ago; I was fine until our daughter Grace came to the pulpit to offer the prayers.

So yes, first you mourn, but curiously, if my first reaction to a spate of deaths is grief, my second reaction is rather the opposite. I find myself called to double down on life. I feel newly resolved to live life in the now, to live it urgently, to live to the hilt. Every funeral becomes a stark reminder that you only live on this



sweet earth once and the clock is ticking – *tempus fugit* and *carpe diem* – all the Latin clichés to the point. You just never know; today is the day, so live it! *Party on!* This is the second reaction to funereal forays into mortality. I think it’s a pretty common one.

Perhaps the most universal of human customs in response to death is to eat, to eat together, to break bread and raise a glass with other people. Food is life, and to eat in the face of death is a stubborn, insistent affirmation of life. Jews sit *shiva* at home; visiting guests bring food. Food, drink, and people. Irish Catholics have big wakes. Food, drink, and people. Presbyterians have polite stand-up white wine receptions, but again, food, drink, and people. I once read about a rabbi who was asked for super-short definition of Judaism. Her answer was ten words: “*They tried to kill us. We got away. Let’s eat.*”

Which could serve as a ten-word synopsis of the story from John’s Gospel that Kevin read a moment ago. Death is all over this text. Jesus is dining with dear friends, Mary, Martha, their brother Lazarus, and his disciples. This is the newly un-dead Lazarus, yanked from death or near-death by Jesus a few days earlier. But remember, Lazarus was merely resuscitated. This is not resurrection. He’ll live to die another day, and he knows it. But there he is, at the table, eating.

And within the week, Jesus will die, and he knows it. But there he is at the table, eating. Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with a substance called “nard,” expensive perfume derived from the spikenard flower. It suggests impending death. It was commonly used to prepare bodies for burial. This was an act of love and devotion, but nard was also the smell you associated with funerals. The rich fragrance that filled that house was the odor of death, more precisely, the odor that covered up death. Jesus says as much in the last verse Kevin read, “*She brought it that she might keep it for the day of my burial.*”

As Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, wrote about this passage in last week’s issue: “*Death,*” she said, “*is the backstory and death is*



*foreshadowed. Death hems us in before and behind, lurking even at a dinner party with close friends.”*

In her recent book, *This Republic Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, author Drew Gilpin Faust, now the President of Harvard, writes about the impact of being surrounded by death during that war, death on a scale Americans had never before seen. She writes: “*More than 2 percent of the nation’s inhabitants were dead as a direct result of the war... one in which unimaginable destruction had become daily experience. Where did God belong in such a world?*” Gilpin asks. “*Doubt,*” she observes, “*threatened to overpower faith...*”

So when death is behind and before as it was in Civil War, when death is behind and before as it was in Mary and Martha’s home the day before Jesus entered Jerusalem, when death is behind and before as it often is in our lives, *how are we to live in this slice of time in between?*

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, when I find myself surrounded by funerals, my response is two-layered. First I grieve. And then I find myself resolving to live, to live as urgently, as fully, as lovingly, as daringly, as courageously as I can. That’s exactly what the dinner party at the center of this story is about. Surrounded by death – behind him and before him – Jesus and those he loved and who loved him sit down and eat together. They party on, they just party on in spite of it all.

For people of faith, this existential bravado is not just “*eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.*” This Gospel dinner party is perhaps a bit of that, but it’s way more. They celebrate with the Lord of Life for a way better reason than “*eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.*” They can party on because even though death may indeed be *pervasive*, resurrection, that impending Easter vanquishing of death, is *invasive*. People of faith can party on, people of faith live daringly and defiantly because life, not death, will have the last word. But I’m getting ahead of myself. It’s still Lent after all. Life as the last word is the message for the big Sunday two weeks from today.



So here you and I are in the Lent of life, in the good old meantime, surrounded by the reality of death. And even though we trust that it will not have the *final* say, death *does* have its say. In the meantime, in this life in the here and now, the dinner party in today's story from the Bible serves as a perfect metaphor for how to live in the face of death. Consider the scene: Mortality is real, but you celebrate anyway. And what do you need for a party? Well, you need three things for any party worth the name.

First, you need food and drink. Food and drink are emblems – more than emblems actually – incarnate expressions of all the good things that come from this sweet and messy material earth God has given us to live in. Food and drink are the very marks of this life itself. You die without them; you gotta have them at the party. *No party without the stuff of earth – food and drink.*

Second, you need people. There's no such thing as a party of one. You need other people for a party to be a party. Human beings were created for life together. We find ourselves, we find our purpose, we find our fullness in relationship with others, as difficult and frustrating as those others can be at times.

I was talking to one of the guys involved in our Brick Church prison ministry the other day about the effects protracted solitary confinement has on prisoners. Solitary confinement veritably kills, emotionally and spiritually. And this is true even in a context where the company you're being deprived of is probably not always so wonderful. Bottom line, we simply need each other to be human. So second, *no party without other people.*

And finally (this one is a bit less apparent), for a party to be a party, we must serve. Mary and Martha serve at the dinner party we heard about today – Martha the good food, Mary the precious nard. And Jesus is about to serve, so serve the world He loves in the most radical way imaginable. There is no party without serving; there has to be some planning and preparation, somebody passing the wine and the finger-food, somebody cleaning up when it's over. Life, by this metaphor, only



becomes the party it's meant to be when you and I freely and gladly serve one another. *No party without serving others.*

So here we are, in the meantime; surrounded by death as we may be, we dare to party on. But remember, for the party, you always need those three things:

the good earth and its blessings,

each other,

and hearts willing to serve.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*