

The Celebration of the Life of Linda Leach
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
6 January 2024

John 11: 21-27

Welcome to the celebration of the life of our friend, Linda Leach. I am glad to see all of you here today. In the Gospel of John today we have the famous episode of Lazarus' death. Jesus has known he is dead for two days, but waits to travel until the third day and arrives at the scene at the fourth day. There are a few reasons why he waits so long: 1. He already knows what he is about to do for Lazarus and wants to wait until there is no doubt whatsoever that Lazarus is indeed dead. Jewish tradition believes the soul hovers around the body for three days and departs at the fourth day. Lazarus was dead with no possibility of coming back to life. 2. The raising of Lazarus is secondary to his real mission which is to glorify God as he tells his friends, so he wants to wait for the right opportunity to glorify God in the presence of others. 3. The second purpose of the raising of Lazarus is that those in the audience may witness the event and believe. It is all about the faith of those present. That they might believe that Jesus is the true Messiah and might accept him. So, in many ways, this passage has more to do with faith than it has to do with bringing Lazarus back to life. And since this passage is about faith, I find some of the affirmations Martha makes very interesting, especially knowing what we know about her. She says the following to Jesus and about Jesus:

You are Lord
If you had been here, my brother would not have died.
God will give you whatever you ask of him.
My brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.
You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.

These are powerful statements about Jesus' identity and vocation. She says that he is Lord or Messiah. At this point, even some of the disciples and definitely most of those present at Lazarus house still wonder if Jesus is the Messiah, but Martha is convinced of this fact. Then she proclaims that where Jesus is there is life. If he had been with them physically, Lazarus would be alive. From here, she acknowledges that Jesus and his Father have such a close relationship that the Father will do anything the Son asks for. Then she affirms that she believes in the resurrection at the last day, and finishes her plea by stating once again that Jesus is the Messiah, the one coming into the world. In one simple conversation she has affirmed Jesus' divinity, his role as Messiah, the resurrection of the dead, and the

special relationship between Jesus and God the Father. If this was a theology final, Martha would get an A+ and would graduate Summa Cum Laude.

This is very interesting because last time we met Martha in the Gospel of Luke 10:40-42, she is described as “distracted,” “busy with many tasks,” and quite whinny, telling Jesus, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” Jesus answers her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” While Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and discussed theology with him, Martha was busy with house chores and the care of a large number of guests. Lest we judge Martha too critically, someone has to do the cooking and the cleaning. Someone has to take care of others, especially if you are the host and you are bound to hospitality by tradition. Someone has to tend to the sick and feed the poor. It would be nice to spend all our days learning theology, but there is real pain in the world and someone has to take care of their neighbors. Jesus’ criticism is not that Martha is busy with life, but, rather, that her life needs balance. As she cares for others, she also needs to make time to develop a relationship with Jesus. She too is called to be a learner, a disciple, a person who delights in a relationship with God.

In the passage today, it is Martha who engages in theological discussions with Jesus. She has learned her lesson since that first time. Her faith has gone through a significant transformation. She has become a proper disciple of Jesus and now she is able to hold her own, not just on matters of service, but also on matters of doctrine and faith. Those who remain stuck on the Martha of Luke fail to see the Martha of John, but I believe both images show us Martha’s full personality and faith. She was a woman who practiced many ministries of service and hospitality and she was a woman of deep faith in Jesus. Two sides of the same coin, and as such, Martha is a perfect image for today’s service.

We are here today to celebrate the life of a woman blessed with the gift of hospitality. Hospitality to the pilgrims who came to *Cursillo* seeking a closer relationship with God and wanted a good meal. Hospitality as she waited at airports for terrified patients for whom a new diagnosis of cancer threw their lives into great turmoil. Hospitality to men and women without a home who came to the *Hope Center Houston* looking for some compassion in the form of a hot meal, a shower, and some clean clothes that fit. Hospitality to members and visitors of Saint Dunstan’s for whom a beautifully set Altar brings them closer to the Divine and enhances their worship experience. Hospitality and service to the poorest of the poor at Cheyenne River Reservation for whom a little bit of compassion can go

a long way. Hospitality and service in everything she did. These are great qualities in the Biblical Martha, and these are great qualities in our beloved friend.

But we also celebrate the many ways in which Linda Leach resembled the Martha of John 11. Linda was a person of deep faith who knew deeply in her heart that Jesus was her Lord and Savior. She knew that where Christ is there is abundant life. She believed in the resurrection of those who accept Jesus as Messiah. She believed that “God so loved the world that he sent Jesus, his only Son, that the whole world might be saved through him.” She belonged to Jesus and showed her faith in Jesus in everything she did for others. And she was fully herself. A good and devoted servant who loved the Lord and others without pretense or superiority.

Let me use a Latin word to describe Linda. The word NEXUS means link or connection. I always saw the connecting tissue between her life and her faith. She lived as she believed and she believed as she lived. Faith and Practice were fully integrated into who she was. She wasn’t a faithful person who from time to time did something good for somebody. She wasn’t a busy doer who from time to time said her prayers. She was a believer who lived as a believer. Her faith and her life were one and the same. She was a person of deep spiritual integrity.

But we could eulogize Linda with flowery words in this service and still dishonor her legacy and her memory. We can say that she was so good and did so many things for others and for God that she earned her way into heaven. She paid the price of admission. Saint Peter has no choice but to open those doors for Linda because she was so super-humanly good. This would dishonor her because Linda Leach knew that we are saved not because of anything we do for God, but because of what God has already done for us through his Son. She knew her salvation depended on Jesus and only on Jesus. And she knew that faith alone in Christ alone were the requisites for salvation. She knew Jesus was resurrection and life, and we too must live like children of the resurrection. In fact, “John 11 asks the church to reflect that Jesus is the resurrection and the life not just for the crisis moment of death, but for all moments in life. Jesus as the resurrection and the life... announces that the world is now definitively under Gods' care and power.”¹

The passage today tells us that Jesus is Lord over death and that for those who believe in him death doesn’t have the last word. We are eternity bound. May today be the day you start working on your relationship with Jesus and the people God has placed in your life. Life is too short to be apart from God. May today be the day you welcome Jesus into your life. Amen!

¹ O’Day, John. *John* (In the NIB Commentary, Page 695).