

“If you had been there”

Martha and Jesus

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The only characters that are directly identified as friends of Jesus in the Gospel of John are Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in John 11:1-44. While John 15 teaches about the greatest gift between friends, Martha's lament to Jesus (11:17-27) offers a window through which we offers a window through which we can reflect on friendship, our relationship to God, and faith.

Friendship

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Friendship implies a relationship that is intimate, and trusting, For friendship to thrive there needs to be shared values and concerns, common ideas, ideals, and worldview. This foundation allows friends to have influence over one another through discussion and disagreement. Friends hold each other accountable for their actions. They respect and accept each other, yet they are not afraid to confront each other when the need arises. Friends depend on one another for support in times of crisis, whether emotional or material. Friendship is a relationship of trust, confidence, and intimacy.

Perhaps the human element of influence and accountability characteristic of friendship has silenced discussion about Jesus and its friends in the Gospels. Friendship with Jesus would not be a common friendship, indeed, it is an uncommon relationship given Jesus' divinity. However, the Jewish religious tradition, of which Jesus and his friends were a part is rooted in an intimate, trusting relationship with God.

The tradition of Lament

In the Old Testament, faith is not assent to a set of beliefs. At least, the Bible does not define it as such. Faith is, however, described through story as a relationship of trust and confidence in God. The Book of Psalms reflects the parameters of this relationship in prayers of praise and lament. We are most familiar with the psalms of praise, Laments can make us uncomfortable. They often accuse God of having a part in the lamenter's suffering. Although it is natural to complain about our troubles, we are reluctant to do this in prayer. We may offer prayers of petition to God for help, but we shy away from complaining to God about the situation and God's responsibility for it. We are more comfortable expressing our joy in prayer but not our sorrow.

Laments have their roots in faith. Only a person of faith, one who has a relationship with God, can accuse and challenge God to act. This is based on the lamenter's understanding that God has the power to provide as God has in the past. Through lament the individual believed God could be influenced and moved to action. It is also assumed that God is part of the problem, that God is at least partly responsible for the source of the lamenter's suffering. The spirit of the lament becomes a testimony of one's trust in God's faithfulness. It becomes a confession of the lamenter's faith in God.

Women are associated with mourning and lament in the Old Testament. For example in Jeremiah 9: 19 the women are expected and encouraged to lament: "Hear, you women the word of the Lord, and let your ears receive his message; teach to your daughters this dirge, and each other this lament." A lament is typically fourfold: address, complaint, petition and affirmation of trust in God. Psalms 6 and 13 are good examples of the lament form. None of these laments describes the actual situation that has produced the lament. Such situations, however, are illustrated in story form. The lament of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1-19 is one example. The lament of Martha is also an illustrative example. *Martha's* lament, like Hannah's expresses and affirms the conviction that God is faithful *and* will provide for God's people.

The Raising of Lazarus

The raising of Lazarus is a familiar story. It contains the famous saying of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the " (John, 11:25). This passage is the longest and last of the seven, signs found in John. Interpreters have focused on the irony of Jesus' act of raising Lazarus from the dead. While it displays his power over life and death, this miracle puts in motion the events that will lead to Jesus' own death (John 11:47-53). The preoccupation of commentators with the significance of this miracle overshadows several other elements in this story, including the portrayal of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus as friends of Jesus. While the raising of Lazarus moves the plot of John's Gospel forward, it is not the climax of the passage. Martha's lament to Jesus is the climax and center of the story.

Martha, Mary and Lazarus as Friends of Jesus

The story begins with a brief description of the situation and the characters involved. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are Jewish friends of Jesus (John 11:19) who live in Bethany. The sisters send Jesus a message that their brother Lazarus is ill. In this message we are directly told of Jesus' relationship to Lazarus, "Lord, the one you love is ill". The sisters, however, do not request that Jesus return and heal their brother.

Their message, though, does reveal something about their relationship with Jesus. They are close enough that it is sufficient to identify Lazarus only as "the one you love." No more need be said. A reason for this may be found in 11:5: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." This is reaffirmed later in the story after Lazarus dies. When Jesus weeps over Lazarus' death the Jews comment, "See how he loved him" (11:36). This story emphasizes a relationship with Jesus that is unprecedented in the Gospels. Given this emphasis the reader might expect Jesus to put everything down and go immediately to his friend who is ill. But Jesus' reaction in the following verse is surprising: he deliberately stays away for two more days (11:6).

When Jesus finally arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has died and has been in the tomb for four days (11:17-19). Bethany was close enough to Jerusalem that many Jews had come to grieve with Mary and Martha. The time of four days is significant. Jewish understanding at the time believed that the soul remains close by for three days after death, but by the fourth day all hope is gone. Martha and Mary both complain to Jesus that had he been there Lazarus would not have died. Jesus sees their grief and that of the Jews who have come to be with them and he "becomes perturbed and deeply troubled" (11:33). The Jews question Jesus' ability to heal, and he becomes perturbed again (11:38). When Jesus arrives at the tomb, he too weeps (11:35). He asks that they remove the stone from the tomb (11:39), says a prayer (11:41-42), and calls Lazarus out (11:43). Lazarus comes out, and Jesus instructs those watching to untie him and let him go (11:44). Despite the emphasis on Jesus' divinity in the Fourth Gospel, the human emotions of Jesus are clearly stated in this story.

“If You Had Been Here”

Martha's lament is imbedded in the exchange she has with Jesus when he finally arrives in Bethany. Until his arrival, Martha has been involved in grieving over her brother's death. Although the sisters' message to Jesus did not express urgency, they must have been surprised and distraught when Lazarus died.

When Martha hears that Jesus is coming, she runs out to meet him while Mary, stays at home. Martha is prepared to confront him about the situation boldly and forthrightly. In contrast to the limited information she and Mary sent in their message to Jesus, Martha now, makes her point clearly and directly. She states what is obvious to her: if Jesus had been there Lazarus would not have died. She does not question Jesus' ability to heal, she only regrets that he was not there to help. The source of Martha's complaint is twofold: the death of her brother and Jesus' absence.

In confronting Jesus, Martha uses the first two elements of a lament, the address and complaint: “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died” (11:21), Martha addresses Jesus as “Lord which expresses given the context, her understanding of Jesus' identity and power. The accusation or complaint follows. Martha's complaint expresses her frustration with the situation. The crisis, for Martha, is rooted at least partly in the actions of Jesus. Jesus is part of the problem because had he been there this crisis could have been averted. As Jesus' friend she holds accountable for not being there. She does not reproach Jesus, as some commentators have argued, nor does her complaint reveal an immature faith. It is a bold statement of her belief in the power of Jesus to heal.

The third element of lament is petition. The lamenter, having stated the complaint, suggests to God how the situation can be remedied. Martha does this indirectly in saying to Jesus "even now I know that ever you ask of God, God will give you" (11:22). She still expects a miracle.

Martha makes her petition to God through Jesus; thus, she acknowledges God as the source of Jesus' power. Her petition becomes a testimony of her faith in God through Jesus.

Martha misunderstands Jesus' response to her that Lazarus will rise as a reference to the resurrection at the end of time (11: 23-24). This brief discussion precedes the important Johannine saying, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25). It focuses on resurrection in the present rather than in the future. In doing so, Jesus challenges Martha's and the reader's perception of life and death. It is a conversation between friends, open and direct. Martha honestly responds and Jesus challenges her thinking on resurrection.

Affirmation of Trust

The last element of lament is affirmation of trust and confidence in the power of God. Martha's response to Jesus' question (11,26) expresses belief in the identity of Jesus and the source of his power, God: “Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world” (11:27). The titles for Jesus used earlier in the Fourth Gospel culminate here in Martha's confession faith. Despite her confession of who Jesus is, Martha was not intimidated by his identity and power. She was not afraid to challenge openly and confront Jesus' behavior and its consequences for her life. She expresses what has become the highest form of trust and confidence for Christians: confession of faith.

Martha's confession is the confession of the Church. It parallels Peter's confession in Mark 8:27-30 and Matthew 16:13-20. As spokesperson for the faith of the community in Jesus, Martha represents the full apostolic faith of the Johannine community in the same way that Peter has been understood as representing the full apostolic faith of the Matthean community.

Conclusion

Martha's lament is to be interpreted in terms of her relationship with Jesus as his friend. Because of their friendship, she confronted Jesus openly and straightforwardly. The spirit in which Martha laments becomes an expression of trust and faith in God. It affirms her belief in Jesus' divinity and identity and is a testimony of her trust in God's faithfulness through Jesus.

While Martha's relationship with Jesus as described in John's Gospel is not typical of what we call friendship today, it is grounded in characteristics of friendship such as trust, confidence, and intimacy. Martha's willingness to lament over her brother's death, to pour out her troubles to Jesus with trust and confidence is exemplary and worthy of our admiration and imitation.