



“Showing Up”

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John 12:1–8 (NRSV)***

The dinner party at Martha’s home in Bethany was, according to John’s gospel, the beginning of the end of life as Jesus and his friends knew it. He went from Bethany to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to Golgotha, and then from Golgotha to a borrowed tomb. So the dinner party at Martha’s was the beginning of the end of Jesus’ earthly life, and life as his friends knew it.

If the Bible would have been handed down to us in audio format, John 12 would have opened with ominous music like the theme song in *Jaws* playing in the background. You remember the tune when the shark starts circling its prey?

One gets the sense from reading John that most of the guests at Martha’s house were oblivious to the dangers that lay ahead. They were much like those innocent swimmers in *Jaws*—all except for Jesus, and perhaps for Mary who anointed him with the costly perfume.

Sometimes in life we are like the dinner guest at Martha’s, or the swimmers in *Jaws*; we are oblivious to the dangers that lie ahead. Sometimes we see the dangers, but only in hindsight, and wonder how we could have ever been so naïve. At other times, we may have been grateful for not having seen the proverbial “handwriting on the wall.”

Sometimes too, particularly when we have a little more distance on a difficult series of events, we realize that we may have learned some things about ourselves and others through these hardships. We have learned that it matters how we show up in times like these, and whether and how others show up for us, or not. We have learned, for example, what we are made of, and whether our own and other’s espoused beliefs and values were lived out, especially under fire.

Consider, for example, what we have learned about Jesus and his followers, who attended Martha’s dinner party. Here and elsewhere in the gospels, we have learned that Martha was a prosperous and industrious woman. She was what some would have called “a worker bee.” Martha got up every morning and did what needed to be done,

and was blessed to be able to provide for her own needs and the needs of others, including Mary and Lazarus' needs.

The author of Luke gives us further insights into Martha's character in his account of the anointing at Bethany. Luke reveals that Martha was not only a prosperous and generous woman, she was also a person vulnerable to bitterness. Her hard work and industrious nature left her little time for spiritual reflection and nourishment, and as a consequence, she sometimes lost patience with those, like her sister Mary, who didn't seem to share her work ethic.

Still, in Martha's defense, one wonders where Jesus' and his ministry would have been without a prosperous, hardworking, and generous woman like Martha. There weren't a lot of other people funding his ministry in those days. There weren't a lot of other people putting a roof over Jesus' head, providing for his basic needs, and those of his inner circle.

Mary, by contrast, was what high church Christians would call "a contemplative." She was particularly enamored of Jesus' teachings, and though she was likely discouraged because of the social norms and customs of the day, Mary lingered at Jesus' feet and hung on his every word.

Mary seemed, in John's view, to be the only disciple who really understood how ominous the times were in which they lived, and how important Jesus' ministry ultimately would be. Her gift of pure nard and her anointing of Jesus' feet were not merely symbols of devotion, they were a sign that the end was near. Her words and deeds were a way of preparing his body for burial and pointing to the significance of his ministry. Mary saw and affirmed what others were completely missing. She was a model disciple, and what modern theologians sometimes think of as a "proto feminist."

Lazarus, by comparison, made a cameo appearance in the anointing at Bethany. We might have expected more. After all, Jesus had raised him from virtual—if not literal—death just days before. Yet, he seems no more clued in about the events of the day than any other diners at the table that night, except for Jesus and Mary.

The only other named guest at the diner was Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus. On the surface of things, Judas said and did all of the right things. He protested the cost of the pure nard, and claimed concern for the poor, though, according to John, Judas was merely concerned for himself, since he kept the common purse, and stole from it regularly to satisfy his needs rather than to provide for the common good. Judas said all the right things at dinner, but, as we know, there was a profound incongruence between his espoused beliefs and values, and the way that he actually lived his life—particularly in the days and weeks ahead.

II

I wonder what contemporary parallels come to mind when we reflect on Martha's dinner party? What challenges have we faced? come to mind? What occasions may have invoked the theme song from *Jaws* in our experience?

Let's think about those questions for a moment. Recall a time or two of personal hardship. Then ask yourself these questions:

How did I show up in those difficult times? How did others?

What did I learn about myself, my family, my friends, my neighbors, and my co-workers?

To stimulate reflection, I'll offer two examples of hardships, which may resonate with many of us.

The fact that we live in hard economic times is not lost on most people in our congregation and wider community. We've been reading about the downturn in the world economy and the impact on the stock market in the news, and in our quarterly investment statements for months—if we are blessed enough to have them.

Some in our congregation and community have been laid off of work, the casualties of somewhat arbitrary corporate downsizings, and have felt iced out of the world of employment. Some barely remember their former lives when mortgage payments and car payments were made without concern, and funds were readily available for vacations and extras. Times are different for some of us now, and we are finding what we and our relationships are made of, and what really matters to us.

The ravages of the economy are well known to many. But what is less well known, and less likely to make the headlines is how a few organizations in our dog-eat-dog world have worked together to share the burden of these hard times with the most vulnerable in our economy.

One employer that a member of our congregation has worked for, for example, took a decidedly different approach to dealing with the economy over a year ago. Rather than taking a proverbial "ax" to the organization, with either a 10% workforce reduction at every level, or going primarily after front-line jobs, the company that I learned about recently included several top managers in the decision-making process about how they would deal with a need to reduce 15% of their expenses in the coming year. The outcome of that action led to upper management electing to take a 10% pay cut in order to retain more front-line workers in the company and to avoid forcing the lowest paid workers into the unemployment lines, given that they had the least capacity to absorb such losses.

A bit later after those changes were announced, it became clear that further cuts would be needed in order for the company to remain solvent. Housekeeping and landscaping service contracts were next on the chopping block. When these cuts were announced, I was impressed to learn that many of the clerical workers whose jobs had been spared through management's commitment to share the burden of the company's challenges volunteered their services, outside of work time, to provide free resume preparation support for the contract workers whose jobs were being eliminated, so that these people might find alternate employment in other corporate and private settings.

None of the decisions that were made by management or the front-line workers in this company negated the hard times that have affected so many in the last year or more. Some still experienced pay cuts, and some still lost their jobs. But what was impressive to me was how one organization rose to the economic challenges of the day in a manner that lightened the load that the most vulnerable would have otherwise borne bear, and made a way through the wilderness for many.

Yes, we learn a lot about ourselves and others in hard times. We learn a lot from how people do or don't show up in the midst of challenge.

Hard times not only hit our workaday worlds. They often hit close to home—like in our personal and family relationships. Consider marriage, for example. Statistically speaking many marriages end in divorce. Some say that as many as 50% of all marriages end in divorce. My research on the topic this past week revealed that this statistic is a bit of an overstatement.¹ But I think most would agree that the number of marriages that dissolve is greater than we would hope.

I went digging to see what the latest research has revealed about divorce rates, and was reminded that there are some correlations, for example, between the age of the persons marrying and the rate of divorce. Recent US Census and CDC findings have shown that persons who marry between the ages of 20 and 24 are the most likely to divorce in the US. People who have been divorced before are more likely to dissolve subsequent marriages. And couples without children are more likely to divorce than couples who are raising children or who do not have children.²

A Barna Research Group Study countered some of the popular folk wisdom frequently touted by conservative Christians, who claim that members of their churches who worship and pray together have much lower divorce rates. Barna's findings refuted such claim and pointed out that the highest divorce rates in the US are in the Bible belt states, while the lowest divorce rates in recent years are in the liberal states of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York.³

One hypothesis that Barna proposed for explaining the incongruence between the conservatives' claims about marriage is that their congregations may create a climate in

¹ <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/d/divorce.htm>

² http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf

³ http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm

which persons whose marriages are on the rocks feel unfit or unsupported and therefore too ashamed to remain with their churches when their marriages dissolve.⁴

A further resource that I consulted this week about marital viability claimed that the major factor determining marital success had to do with the quality of *relationship skills* that a couple demonstrated. Relationship skills have to do with how well couples are equipped to handle the challenges that befall virtually all couples and families.⁵

I don't intend to claim that there is a one-size-fits-all solution for marriage and family relationships that are going through rough patches, but I do want to offer the encouragement that many couples and families have been helped to strengthen—or at least learn and heal from hardship—by working with professional marriage and family counselors.

In my experience as a pastor, and based on the anecdotal comments that friends of mine have made who are marriage and family therapists, it seems that far too often couples and families wait too long to seek support in the midst of their struggles. By the time persons and families arrive in a therapist's office too much damage is done and too often counseling ends up being more of a means of minimizing the fallout of an otherwise nasty divorce. Believe me, an amicable divorce is to be preferred from a nasty one, and of course, all parties have to be willing to participate in the therapy for it to be effective. Finding a therapist that's a good match for all participants is also an important step to healing and reconciliation.

So I offer this piece of advice for couples and families in crisis: whenever those storms befall your relationships—as they will befall every household—be quick to seek support at the first signs of struggle, not at the bitter end. Utilize counseling as a resource to learn about yourself and your spouse and to build relationship skills rather than as a court of last resort.

III

Now I've offered a couple of examples of hard times and how folks may or may not show up in and through these times. I've offered one example from work life and one from family life. So I return to my earlier questions: what comes to mind when you reflect on Martha's dinner party? What contemporary challenges do you recall in your life? How did you and others show up (or not) in those difficult times? What did you learn about yourself, your family, your friends, your neighbors, or your co-workers?

Did you discover strengths in yourself or others that you never knew you had? Did you discover some things that need acknowledgement or healing? Did you find that you or others still have some learning and growing to do?

⁴ http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm

⁵ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2435417/>

To be sure, hard times put us to the test, and we discover, as Martha and her guests did, that there may be things in ourselves and in our lives that need amendment, reconciliation, growth, or healing.

The point of this passage, of course, is not to rub our noses in what's wrong, but rather to point us to the good news that we worship a God who understands our hardships and has come to offer us hope—hope that we live into and experience in greater degrees as we dare to face the places of pain and suffering in our lives and world, and make the changes that would help us live into the Easter hope that lays ahead for us and all people on God's horizon. Amen.