

# WHAT WOULD MARTHA DO?

## *Three Exemplars of Virtue in John's Gospel*

**H**ow many times have you heard the phrase “what would Jesus do?” In my childhood, the letters WWJD were printed onto T-shirts, made into bracelets, and I had one classmate with it inked onto his very skin. The phrase is an easy way to provide guidance during difficult choices. It reminds us of the virtuous nature of Jesus and asks us to imitate him. Jesus is a teacher and we the pupils. However, Jesus is not the only moral teacher within our Catholic tradition. Exemplars of virtue abound within the stories of the saints and the figures of Scripture. I want to reflect upon three individuals from John's Gospel: Martha, Mary of Bethany and the man born blind. Like Jesus they provide us models of virtuous behavior.



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### *What would Martha do?*

In the eleventh chapter of John, Jesus hears about his friend Lazarus falling terribly ill. He makes his way to the town only to wait outside the city limits. After a few days, Lazarus' sister Martha learns that Jesus has arrived and goes out to meet him. When Martha encounters Jesus, she says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask” (John 11:20-22). She reveals to Jesus her commitment to his ministry and an awareness of his relationship with God. Jesus replies, “Your brother will rise again.” To which Martha responds, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

This conversation between Martha and Jesus exemplifies the virtue of hope. Martha comes out to meet Jesus knowing that God will give whatever Jesus asks. She has hope in the power of Christ and in his relationship with the Father. She believes in the eschaton (the final events of humanity) and the coming Kingdom of God. This hope compelled her to seek out Jesus even beyond the city limits.

We can follow Martha's example of hope. We can have hope that God will answer the call of his

Son. Through hope we can exit the comforts of the city limits in our lives, to seek out Jesus in the margins. When we find him in our friends, family and neighbors, we know he will stand by us. Martha had hope in Jesus; we can have hope in one another.

When death or tragedy enters our lives, we ought to seek the comfort of a friend. Martha sought the comfort of her friend Jesus. She knew that the friendship would give her hope to continue in the face of such sadness. I gain hope from those around me. They provide words of comfort and support. We often hear the phrase, “all will be well.” Many times we shrug such sentiment away,

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allowing the pain to cause despair in our hearts. Martha shows how hope dispels the despair. It brings God and Jesus into our souls, raising up our spirits, and urging us to continue in the light of Christ.

So, when tragedy strikes, and the future becomes uncertain, we can ask ourselves, “What would Martha do?”

*What would Mary of Bethany do?*

John's Gospel tells the story of Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, washing and anointing the feet of Jesus before a supper party: "Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair" (John 12:3). Mary carries out an act of hospitality that none of the other disciples had shown. In a very intimate way, she welcomes Jesus into the house.

Mary's action highlights a major characteristic of the virtue of hospitality. Hospitality involves a very intimate act in that it does not mean only to welcome someone into your house; it involves welcoming the person into your life. By washing Jesus' feet, Mary creates a physical connection. She allows herself to become vulnerable and in doing so reveals to Jesus her inner nature.

The intimacy is also addressed by Jesus who defends Mary of Bethany, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it [the perfumed oil] for the day of my burial" (John 12:7). The correlation between the feet washing and the burial ritual only emphasizes the intimacy of the act. The relationship one must have to wash the lifeless body of another truly exceeds that of a mere acquaintance or neighbor. It respects the dignity of the individual.

We learn from Mary a similar lesson to what we learn from all the virtues in John's Gospel – to welcome someone is to welcome Christ. To welcome a person is to show them that they are loved and have value in our eyes. So when we encounter strangers in our midst, when the poor and vulnerable enter our walls, let us ask the question, "what would Mary of Bethany do?"

*What would the man born blind do?*

The man born blind demonstrates the virtue of fidelity. Here is a man who was abandoned by everyone, even his family, and yet he trusts in the power of Jesus. After being healed, he faced interrogation from the leaders of the synagogue. The priests questioned him repeatedly on his encounter with Jesus and the healing of his sight. They did not even believe his story; his parents abandon him once again. Yet, the man remained faithful to Jesus and his story (John 9:1-41).

The man born blind reveals to us how to re-

main faithful in face of adversity. He is completely vulnerable and alone. His family allows him to be questioned by the religious authorities. He never once lies, nor tries to save himself. He keeps Jesus at the forefront of his mind and his actions. We learn that fidelity is a virtue that can bring much hardship and pain. By keeping our focus on the good and the right, fidelity guides our actions. It is a virtue that requires great strength and courage. As Christians we must remain faithful to Christ. Our fidelity to the will of God will bring us into salvation and the New Kingdom.

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How can we not feel capable of living virtuous lives when we read about the man born blind? His life was one of constant struggle and misery. Yet, he acted faithfully. His example teaches us that we too can overcome the harshness of the world to live lives of virtue. When we question our fidelity to the good, let us ask, "what would the man born blind do?"

There are countless virtues exhibited everyday within Catholic health care. Our associates and co-workers exhibit them in every interaction. Yet, we all experience moments when the path is not so clear, or the temptation to take the lesser road too great. In these moments we can turn to the lives of others and let their example be our guide. "What would Jesus do" is an excellent reminder of Christian virtues. But let us not forget those other exemplars, like Martha, Mary of Bethany and the man born blind. They are fully human like us and during times of trial they listened to the calling of hope, hospitality and fidelity. Who is someone in your life that you consider a model? Who stands out as a virtuous person? Are you someone called to be an example of virtue for another?

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