

This morning I would like to begin my message by sharing some wonderful quotes written by a man some of you may have heard of by the name of Andy Rooney. He was an American radio and television writer and was known for having a gift of saying much with few words! Here are just a couple of his quotes. I've learned ...That being kind is more important than being right. I've learned ...That sometimes all a person needs is a hand to hold and a heart to understand. I've learned... That no one is perfect until you fall in love with them. I've learned .. That when you're in love, it shows.

Now, I'm fairly certain, that most couples who have been married a long time have discovered how important it is to hold on to the love you have for your spouse, especially when you have an argument or a disagreement. They could probably also share the well-known insight, that it is better to embrace all of the wonderful gifts our spouses have to offer, then to focus on the few character traits they might possess that annoy us on occasion. Most of all, anyone who takes their marriage life seriously understands that you never stop learning if you want to have a successful marriage. I'm guessing that most couples who have celebrated lengthy wedding anniversaries, if they are honest with themselves, would admit that they still don't have it all figured out.

I think the same is true when it comes to our faith, when it comes to being a Disciple of Christ! Even if we read our Bibles every day, if we have perfect church attendance, and even if we volunteer regularly in our communities, we will always and should always be trying to discover what following Jesus entails. In our Gospel story this morning, we are provided with a number of examples that reveal to us what being a disciple is all about. We also observe that just as Andy Rooney could say a lot with so few words, we can demonstrate our love and devotion to God through small acts of compassion as demonstrated by a woman and a bottle of perfume.

So how does our narrative begin? It begins with what appears to be a random act of kindness. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus host a dinner party for Jesus, perhaps as a way of showing their gratitude for Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life. The meal they share might have even be a kind of a precursor to the special supper Jesus will share with his disciples on the night of his betrayal. In their own way each of the three hosts at the party demonstrate certain character traits that could be considered marks of discipleship.

The first trait is one that many of us are familiar with, especially if you have ever had the privilege of enjoying coffee fellowship on Sunday mornings here at First Lutheran. It is the attribute known as hospitality, and it is represented by Martha who symbolizes the idea of *work* as she serves the dinner that has been prepared for her Lord, our Lord. You may recall that earlier in John she gets upset with her sister Mary because she is sitting at Jesus feat listening to him instead of helping her with her tasks. When I was doing my clinical pastoral education in Seminary I was told by one of my instructors that I have a Martha type personality because I generally like to help others by doing. Through our faith in Christ, which at times is work in and of itself, we are called to do good works, to live fruitful lives.

The second character trait that we encounter in our story for today is embodied by Lazarus whose mere presence serves as a witness to any and all who had seen him die and rise again. People went to Bethany just to be able to see this man who had been raised from the dead. Lazarus represents what it means to be a witness, and his new life not only symbolizes the awesome power of Christ's miracles, but also shows us the love, grace, and compassion that Jesus has for all who would call themselves his followers and friends. We too ought to "walk in the newness of life" as witnesses, because through Christ's death and resurrection we have been raised from the dead. And we can witness to those around us by sharing

with them the ways in which we have encountered Jesus in our lives and by telling our stories and offering our faith based testimonies with any and all who will listen.

The final trait that we come across in our narrative is represented by Mary who symbolizes the act of worship as she bends down and anoints Jesus' feet with oil, a perfume that likely cost a years' wages. Let's take a little time to examine her actions in greater detail.

Now, the tradition of foot washing in those days was a routine matter of cleanliness, and the use of oil on one's feet was soothing for those shod in sandals. People often washed and anointed their own feet, though some slaves would also wash and anoint the feet of others. In fact, slaves were the only ones who would do such a thing, and so through her actions Mary is asserting just how devoted she is to Jesus. She is willing to act as his servant. How many of us can say that we are willing to do the same?

It was also significant that Mary wiped his feet with her hair. Women took pride in their long hair. By using her hair to wipe the feet of Jesus, Mary further exhibits a sense of humility that illustrates the depth of loyalty and love that she has for him.

One could argue that Mary is the model disciple. She seems to exhibit all of the traits that each of the three hosts of the dinner party represent. Through her actions she is *working* by washing Christ's feet, *witnessing* through her presence to those throughout the house who could smell the costly perfume, and *worshiping* by humbling herself before Jesus. Mary does what Jesus will do himself only six days later in the Upper Room when he will wash the feet of his disciples.

And if Mary is the model disciple, the prime example for what we should do and can do, then Judas, is shown to be her opposite. Where Mary is generous,

Judas is greedy. While Mary illustrates her faith with her actions, Judas talks piously about giving to the poor when we know he is not sincere.

Mary's passionate discipleship in this scene at Bethany definitely stands out! Her actions model the kind of love and loyalty that we are called to emulate as beloved children of God and as followers of Jesus. Parker Palmer, in his book *The Active Life*, tells how six months living in a monastery taught him a valuable lesson. A life of contemplation and meditation is valuable only if it leads us to action...to living out our faith in daily life.

Action on the other hand, without prayer and reflection can be meaningless and even reckless. For Palmer, the two go hand in hand and *both* are necessary. Mary illustrates this well. Like a true disciple, Mary follows the road less taken. She not only meditates upon the words of Jesus, but she chooses to act upon them as well.

And what about us? How do we daily live out our baptismal calling to love God and serve others? We recall that when Jesus was asked "what is the greatest commandment?" he replied: "love the Lord your God *and* your neighbor as yourself." That is the cruciform mark of a faithful disciple. While working, witnessing, and worshiping may help us focus on our vertical relationship with God, how does this affect our horizontal relationship with others?

St. John provides us with an excellent answer to this question when he writes: "We love because God first loved us. If someone says, 'I love God,' yet hates one's brother or sister, they are a liar. For we cannot love God whom we have not seen, if we do not love our brother or sister whom we have seen. This is the command that Christ gave us: one who loves God, must also love their neighbor." Love is the evidence of being a disciple.

Each and every one of us has a different way of learning how to do things. For some of us, we learn by picking up a book, reading about how to do it, and

then we try to put into practice what we have read. If we want to discover how to fix things around the house we might purchase, “Carpentry for Dummies,” study it, and then try to do what the book says. Others of us may be visual learners, we learn by actually observing someone do it, and then we try to mimic or copy their actions. If we want to learn how to cook, for example, we might watch one of our favorite cooking shows and follow along as people like Rachel Ray and Gordon Ramsay prepare some of their favorite dishes. Of course, regardless of which learning style suits us best, if we truly want to become good at, or master how to do something, we have to continually practice what we have learned. Ultimately you might say that the final key to our education in discipleship is by doing what we have read, or by carrying out what we have observed.

If we are going to learn how to be disciples of Christ, then the best way to do this for some of us would be by reading scripture and then putting into practice what we have read. If we learn by observing others then perhaps, we should be watching other Christians who actually live out their discipleship and copy their actions until we can do it on our own. In either case, I’m sure we can all agree that practice makes perfect.

The more we do something the easier it is to do. Eventually there will come a time when we will finally understand what discipleship truly means as we work, witness, worship, and ultimately when we love God and each other as Jesus calls us to do. Perhaps just as I continue to grow and learn in my life as a Pastor, as a Son, as a Brother, and as a Friend, we need to continue to learn how to be disciples! Keep in mind though that as we do this, God’s spirit is there to help us in our studying and in our attempts at putting into practice what we learn. And Thanks be to God for that.