

Joyce Johnson
2/16/17-8/23/10

There's a name that's associated with the essence of good hospitality: Martha.

Today that's because of Martha Stewart, of course ... but this association goes way back to Jesus' day. That Martha lived with her sister Mary. In the gospel of Luke we read about a particular visit Jesus paid to their home. By the way Martha is bustling about you can tell that it's very important to her that Jesus is well-taken-care of. That's what good Marthas do – they pay attention to the details, they anticipate others' needs, they take pride in making people feel welcome and cared for. It's how they show love.

In many ways, Joyce was a Martha. She excelled at taking care of people who mattered to her. We just heard memories of how she did that. It brought her great joy to do those little things that showed her love to her children, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but most of all, to her husband.

Joyce met Milt at a dance in Zumbrota back in 1938. She'd gone to the dance with another guy, but this tall, good-looking, well-dressed fellow caught her eye instead. She ended up borrowing his leather jacket ... and then, accidentally went home with it. At least, we think it was an accident. It was a pretty nice jacket ... or maybe Joyce had something else in mind. Because when Milt asked for it back she said he would have to come to her house to pick it up. Their conversation when he got there must have been something, because a week later they ran off to Iowa and got married.

The early years saw Milt and Joyce spending a lot of time apart. He was on the road for his work with the CCC, then in the Merchant Marines, and then on the oil boats for Texaco. There was probably a little adjusting for this young bride. But she took her job as caretaker and homemaker seriously. And the love and affection they shared took deep root – roots that continued to grow for almost 65 years of marriage.

Joyce was a classic 50s housewife. There were always fresh-baked treats in the kitchen. She sewed clothes and made quilts. Windows got washed every week. That sounds like a Martha, doesn't it? Milt did the driving and balanced the checkbook ... though Joyce certainly learned to get around and manage as they got up in years. There wasn't a house project she was afraid to tackle, and she was quite pleased when she learned some new skill.

For Martha in the Bible family was extremely important. You don't read about Martha without hearing about her sister, Mary, or her brother, Lazarus. They took care of each other. The same was true for Joyce. Her family meant the world to her – literally, the world. One of the great family tales was how in high school Joyce decided to research her family tree. She interviewed her grandfather, and based on his stories was able to trace her genealogy back to England. This was back in the days long before long-distance calls or the internet. She was delighted to learn about her English relatives, and even looked them up when she and Milt took a vacation to London. When they lived in Indiana and weren't near their immediate families, they adopted folks from the church to become their family. And wherever they were – Detroit or Indiana or Rochester or on the road visiting family or friends, Joyce brought sparkle and strength and a great sense of humor.

Those were things that would serve Joyce well over the years, because life wasn't always easy. When Steve was going to college, Joyce took her first – and only – job outside the home working at a department store. She didn't like it (and Milt really didn't like it) but she was willing to do what it took to pay for his education. Her moment of truth came when Milt's health started to fail, and she had to watch him get sick and pass away. And it was hard when she had her stroke a few years ago. But Joyce made the best of things and

moved out to Montana to be closer to Steve and Jeanne, and she kept her spunk right up until the end.

The moment of truth for Martha comes at a time of great sadness. Her brother Lazarus, gets sick. They sends for Jesus, but he doesn't get there in time, and Lazarus dies. It's terribly hard on this little family. They don't want to face life without the one they love. When Jesus finally arrives, Martha's grief spills over: "Lord, she says, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." We can understand how she feels. It's so painful to say goodbye. But then she remembers what she has come to believe. Her deep faith in Jesus brings peace to her heart. "But even now," she says, "I know that he will rise again at the last day." And Jesus tells her: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever lives and believes in me, though he die, will have eternal life." It's one of the greatest and most comforting statements of our faith.

It's also a reminder that so much of life is out of our hands. Like Joyce, we can try our best, we can take care of others, we can watch out for family, we can love deeply. But at the end of the day, the most important thing we can do is place our trust, our lives in the hands of the one who made us. As Paul wrote in the passage we heard from Ephesians, God sent Jesus to bridge the divide between heaven and earth, to put to death all pain and suffering and sin and loss. Because of the cross we are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. And so, even on days like today, when tears are close and hearts are just a little empty, we can say with Martha, "Yes, Lord. I believe."

Martha's story had a happy ending. Joyce's story does too. We know God has promised her no more pain. We hope she's one with the man she loved best. And we trust that she's got a place in the kingdom, where she can practice her exceptional hospitality forever. Thanks be to God for that. Amen.