**Siblings in Ordinary Times**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Martha, Martha, Martha. I have always had a fondness in my heart for St. Martha.

Alas, because she made one complaint recorded in scripture she has been forever remembered as a whiny sister. Yet, I admire her enthusiasm for all the details of hospitality and the hard work she put into welcoming Christ into her home in Bethany. Anyone who has ever welcomed me as a guest knows I appreciate good food and fresh coffee! Because of this, she is now the patron saint of a diverse throng that includes cooks, innkeepers, servants, waiters, homemakers, and dieticians, among others.

Yet, when we celebrate St. Martha’s memorial on July 29th, I think of her in a different light: as someone who, I believe, has a special interest in the welfare of sisters and brothers.

We are told that Martha had two siblings: Mary and Lazarus. Her dispute with her sister about who was working more than the other is the first time we meet Martha. As Martha criticizes Mary for failing to help out, they show a glimpse of the squabbles that are part of everyday family life.

But the second time we meet Martha says something profound about the relationship between siblings. When Lazarus died, Christ came again to the home of Mary and Martha to mourn their brother and his friend. Martha, ever the one to speak her mind, exclaimed that her brother would not have died if Christ had been present. It was in response to this sisterly grief that Christ said those great words of comfort to her: *“I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”*

These words have reverberated through the centuries as the promise to all who mourn the deaths of their loved ones. Of all the myriad griefs known to humanity, Christ chose to share these words of hope to a sister mourning a brother. Christ, both only son of God and brother to us all, knew that the relationship between sisters and brothers is something sacred indeed. It was the love between siblings that produced a grief so great that it prompted a response so much greater.

Certainly, other siblings in scripture demonstrate less-than-loving sibling bonds. Esau and Jacob, Cain and Abel, Joseph and his jealous older brothers, and the unnamed prodigal son and his equally nameless brother, to name a few, show the envies and rivalries that can tear at the heart of a family. Even among the apostles themselves there are hints of a rivalry between the brothers James and John.

Yet, the love of Martha for her siblings, and Christ’s appreciation of that love, is a reminder of how important those bonds can be. Relationships with siblings can be the longest of our lives. They are the people we grow up with. If we are blessed, they are also among the people we grow old with.

The secular world has tried, unsuccessfully, to spread recognition of “National Siblings Day” on April 10th. Others who share my own place in my family have tried to sell August 12th as “Middle Child Day.” Alas, that has not caught on.

But, maybe when July 29th rolls around, if we are blessed to have siblings in our lives, we can give them a shout-out of thanks, remember them in our prayers, and do something to celebrate the great gift of this special friendship sealed by the bonds of family.

If we are grieving the passing of siblings from this life, St. Martha will certainly understand that grief as it was one she knew so well.

If we are separated from siblings through estrangement, illness, absence or other painful circumstances, July 29th may also be a chance to bring those to prayer.

To my own siblings and to sisters and brothers everywhere, happy July 29th! Thanks for walking together through ordinary times.

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