

Martin of Tours

From *More Once-Upon-A-Time Saints: Faith-Tales for Children* by Ethel Marbach, Copyright 1978, St. Anthony Messenger Press

Once upon a time there was a boy named Martin who thought the most important thing in the world was to do one's duty and to do it *well*. If you were a tailor, you should pay attention to sewing seams so they wouldn't be bumpy and lumpy. If you were a gardener, you should not plant your cabbages until maple leaves were the size of squirrels' ears. And if you were a soldier, as Martin was, you should be firm and fearless and sit proudly on your fine horse, your shield polished and your plume straight and tall.

Martin was a soldier because his father was a soldier. He was born in an army camp in the outpost of Hungary and he grew up with the sounds of legions marching and changing guard. He did not particularly want to be a soldier, but his father told him that it was the right thing for him to do. He felt a duty to respect his father's wishes so, at the age of 15, Martin joined the imperial cavalry. It would not be an unpleasant life, he thought. He loved horses and the orderly life of a soldier.

But already he had heard of Christ and his message that all men are brothers. Martin eagerly listened to his friends in the barracks discuss this new idea and the more he thought about it, the more he was certain that he would become a Christian. Someday. Someday soon. Maybe tomorrow. But

definitely not today.

Martin was a good soldier who spared himself nothing in work or bravery, and within three years he had become the leader of his battalion. He cut a handsome figure as he rode ahead of his men—tall and blond, with blue eyes which looked directly at you when he spoke. And when he spoke, his words were gentle, even when giving orders.

One winter his unit was transferred to France, to a city called Amiens. It was the bitterest of cold clays and Martin took on the extra job of inspecting the stables and food supplies so his men could have some relief from the cold. As he rode his horse past the gate to the city, he saw a poor, huddled mass of rags and flesh. The bare skin of this man's skinny arms was turning purple, and he shivered as he held a bowl out for whatever scraps of food he could beg from passers-by.

No one bothered to stop. It was much too cold to stay out in such weather longer than one had to. If the beggar had any sense, he'd realize that! The crowd scurried and hurried to return to the warmth of their homes. Martin passed by slowly, thinking, "How can I do this? This poor man is my brother. How can I think about loving my neighbor if I can go past this beggar and pretend I don't see him? Am I a Christian or am I not?"

He turned his horse around and came back to the beggar. He knew he had no food or money with him, so he took off his heavy, warm, royal cloak made of red wool and neatly split it in half with his sword. Then Martin wrapped it

snugly around the speechless man's shoulders and put the other half around his own. "We are brothers, my friend," he said gently, "this belongs to you as well as me."

Martin rode off and came smack up against his commanding officer. He stared at Martin with angry surprise and scolded him for destroying government property. "Why did you do such a ridiculous thing?" he demanded. Martin said nothing in his defense, because he knew the officer was not a Christian and would not understand.

That night Martin had a dream that was so real, it woke him up. In his dream, he saw Christ wearing the half-a-cloak he had given the beggar. The Lord was surrounded by angels who asked him where he had gotten such a fine garment. "From my servant, Martin, who has not yet been baptized," he said.

When Martin woke, he dressed quickly and ran through the quiet morning streets, searching for the first priest he could find in Amiens. He was baptized and knew a great, peaceful joy. At last *someday* had become *today*. "I'm a Christian!" he sang inside himself. "Because of that," he thought, "I shall make an even better soldier."

For two years he tried to be an even better soldier but found that he could no longer be part of fighting and killing and adding to the misery of starving people and burnt-out lands. He went to his commander, Julian, and asked to be released from the Roman army.

Julian frowned fiercely and yelled loudly that Martin was a coward and a weakling. This hurt Martin, because he

knew that he had never been either, but he knew that Julian was upset about other things these days. A big battle was brewing against the Allemani, a savage tribe crossing the Alps from Italy and spreading all over France.

When Martin said he would not fight, Julian had him thrown into prison with the promise that after battle Martin would be put to death (if he were still alive). At that moment, a group of Allemani captains came to Julian's tent, asking for peace on his terms. Julian, very surprised, accepted their offer, and the battle was never fought.

Deep down, Julian admired Martin's honesty in following what he felt to be right for him, and ordered his chains removed. "I do not know your Christ," he said, "but if he is so important to you that you would risk your life to follow him, then you are free to do so."

So Martin left the army and became a priest. He traveled throughout the Empire, up and down the Alps, eluding robbers and wild animals and avalanches and preaching to wild tribes who would just as soon kill him as a bear for their supper. Martin's first job was to get their attention long enough to convince them that he was not as tasty as a bear to eat, and *then* he could tell them about God and loving all men as brothers.

These people were very suspicious and whispered behind their hands to each other when Martin was talking. In one town, everyone worshiped a huge ancient pine tree with gnarled limbs reaching up to heaven. The townspeople found more comfort in adoring a tree they could see than a God they

could not.

The tree *was* beautiful and proud and towering, and Martin could understand why they were in awe of it. "It is truly a thing of beauty," Martin said to them, "but all things of beauty come from God. So God, not the tree, is to be worshiped."

The men came after Martin with splintery, thick clubs and sharp, pointed rocks. Martin held up his hand, "Peace, children, I know my God is here today. Tie me to the tree, the way it leans to fall. Then cut it down. If I am wrong, then it will crush me."

They thought about this and said, "All right." Everyone *knew* the tree could fall only one way. So they tied him taut to the tree and four men took turns chopping it, it was so thick. It fell with a crackling, thundering crash—the *other* way, with Martin on top of it!

The people were so dumbfounded, they readily came into the fold of a God who could change the way a tree fell.

Soon Martin's fame became so great, everyone in France wanted him to become the Bishop of Tours. This was the last thing Martin wanted. After all these years of teaching and preaching, he wished only to build a hut in the forest and spend the rest of his life serving God with prayers and a simple life. But once again, he knew he had to do what God called him to do. So he would have to wait to plant his peas and thatch his roof and listen to the song of the wild cuckoo in the woods. Now he must be bishop and dress royally and use silver plates and bless new schools and churches.

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His training as a soldier helped him to be on time, work quickly and without fuss to take care of the many duties of a bishop. And although he would never again go into battle with his brothers, he did have many wrestlings with the Devil, who teased him in all manner of disguises.

Once when Martin had set out by foot for Rome, the Devil decided to tag along, skipping beside him. "Oh me, oh my, could this be the Bishop Martin, the Bishop of Tours, *walking*? Like an ordinary beggar? Oh my, it cannot be, I must be wrong!"

Martin would not be rattled. "You are too smart to be wrong, Devil. We know each other very well, you know. Now what are you up to today?"

"Well, I just cannot *imagine* a bishop being so poorly treated. Surely your Master could do better for you. At least a horse like the good old days. It is a long, long, dusty way to Rome, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Martin, smiling. "What I need is a good old mule," and with that, he pointed his finger at the Devil and changed him into a donkey on the spot. He climbed on his back and said, "Giddap, Devil, see if your feet are as quick as your tongue!"

And off they cantered, on the long, dusty way to Rome. The Devil was soon sweating and panting, and by the time they reached Rome, he was ready to collapse. Martin bade him good-day. "I'm sure I'll see you again. You'd better rest up. You're in *terrible* shape now!"

Martin finally did get his one wish: to live in the forest in a cave, not a hut, in Marmoutier, eating simply once a day and sharing his life with anyone who passed his way. When he died, his friends laid his body on a boat without oars or sails and floated it up the river towards Tours. It is said that the flowers along the banks bowed down as the raft sailed by and a strange tinkling music in the sky could be heard.

Martin spent most of his life not doing what he wanted to do but what he felt was his duty. Sometimes it is quite pleasant to do your duty, because you get praised for it. You make your bed with the blankets even on both sides; you cut your fingernails evenly; you don't throw your socks under the bed; you clean out your ring around the bathtub. And everyone says what a good child you are and that gives you a neat, warm, comfortable feeling.

But sometimes doing your duty does not bring smiles or friendly hugs. When Martin said he did not want to fight, Julian didn't clap his hands and say, "Great!" When he cut his cloak in half to warm the shivering beggar, Martin knew that his commander wouldn't smile and pat him on the back and say, "Think nothing of it, Martin! "

You might think, as the commander did, that it was a silly, wasteful thing to do. What good did it do, anyway, to give the beggar half a cloak? It didn't warm him that much.

What really warmed the man's heart as well as his body was Martin's love, which was just a small reflection of God's love. *That's* what made that piece of royal red wool as snug as thermal underwear. As a poet once wrote:

. . . all who move
In the mortal sun
Know halfway warm
Is better than freezing,
As half a love
Is better than none.*

*Phyllis McGinley, *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley*, Viking, 1954.