

Sermon for Trinity Church

Proper 11, 2019

"...the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

My Mother read the Bible after dinner nearly every night of the week her entire adult life. She reveled in the stories that she loved, and she sought in every way to live a "Biblical life." She did, however, have some serious quibbles with the Bible and even Jesus himself. For example, she didn't understand why Jesus didn't agree with the Pharisees when the Pharisees demanded that the disciples wash their hands before eating. And she fretted about Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law only to put her to work as soon as she stood up. "Isn't that just like a man?" she asked. But of the stories that really troubled her, this morning's Gospel put her over the edge. "What was Mary doing? She should get up and help her sister. She should get to work. After the meal, after clean-up, then she can talk!" When Jesus excused Mary for choosing the better way, my mother could barely excuse Jesus. She was mad! Why did Jesus discourage Martha and encourage the shirking Mary?

My Mother was very far from the only person who argued with Jesus. Over the last twenty centuries, this story of the two women, Mary and Martha, has gathered interpretations the way boats gather barnacles; over time, you can only see barnacles and no boat. Pretty much the same thing has happened with this Gospel—over time, cultural beliefs have stuck to the story until the story gets obscured. I can't begin to tell you how many churches I've known that have a "Mary and Martha" guild, committee or circle. Guilds, circles or committees, these strictly women's groups (no man need apply) were set up to get the hard work done around the church. The name of these groups plays on the cultural belief that this morning's story demonstrated there's a conflict between hard work and contemplation, between labor and prayer. In this Gospel story, Martha is the busy one (and that can't be bad, really, can it?) and Mary is the person who sits in contemplation with the Lord.

You can see how my mother might have been upset, and plenty of other people too. Of course, the world needs hard-working, diligent people including women. Without them, my mother would like to know, how would the house get clean or a meal get to the table? Look at Peter's mother in law—she was healed so that she could serve Jesus and the disciples. But—and this is critical—this is not the way that Jesus understands what's happening. "Martha, Martha" has fretted

too much; Mary has chosen the better course, to listen to Jesus as a disciple. And that's a very different, very radical story.

You know now that last Sunday's story of the Good Samaritan is not just a call to compassion? It's also a story of radical hospitality, a profound Godly hospitality that ironically enough, only the Samaritan, the enemy of the Jews, practices. Not so the two Jewish religious figures. The failure of the two religious officials in the Samaritan story painfully shows us that religious piety can become a refuge from the world. We can screen ourselves from our responsibility, even our love, behind our holiness. We are called by Christ to encounter and care for the world, not to hide from it. We are called by Christ to turn our back on culture and traditions that keep us from loving as God loves us.

Reading this Gospel following the story of the Good Samaritan, we know this story of the women must be a story about hospitality and radical discipleship, not just for the individual but for everyone. This Gospel story starts out with hospitality. The women are called to domestic chores that are both traditional and culturally critical. Jesus has come to visit the family and as a visitor, he's to be treated with the utmost respect. There's nothing unusual about that hospitality; from the book of Genesis onwards, hospitality to strangers and visitors is paramount in Israel's spiritual life. No matter what, the needs of visitors and strangers in your land supersede your own.

Sticking to that tradition would be disruptive all around our world. All of us are sometimes suspicious of visitors and strangers at our door; this Gospel story is threatening in its own right. But that disruption is just the beginning in this morning's Gospel. What comes next is a 10-point quake, shaking our world, our way of life. In the ancient world, and even in many places in our world, women are relegated to a secondary role. Women are seated in another room, women are hidden from public eye, women are meant to be seen and not heard. Sound strange? Even here in Bend, there are places, including churches, where women are prohibited from leadership positions. So, what does Mary do this morning? Because Mary so longs to hear the Good News, she radically violates tradition and culture. She smashes habit and custom. Ignoring her so-called "proper place," she takes a seat as a disciple at the feet of Jesus. Mary sits right there. In front of everyone. In a room full of men. Mary does this because she loves God and for no other reason.

So be it. But here's the ironic part—rather than siding with her sister, Martha complains to Jesus that she's stuck with all the work. In other words, Martha is going with the cultural flow and not swimming upstream, against the traditional current, like Mary. And Martha's upset.

The next words of Jesus seem all too simple. "Martha, Martha, Mary has chosen the better part and that will not be taken away." Notice that Jesus doesn't dismiss Martha's contribution—not one bit. Jesus practices radical hospitality himself. But the more important thing, more than Martha's anxious concern, is following Jesus. Follow Jesus, and everything else, absolutely everything else, will fall into place.

We can try to domesticate this Gospel story. We can try to subdue it by turning it into a tiff between two sisters. We can make it out that it's a story about the difference between hard work on one hand and prayer on the other. But in the end, we cannot succeed. The words of Jesus are earthshaking—nothing, nothing at all, no social prohibitions, no traditions, even religious tradition, can come between the spiritually hungry and God. In other words, Jesus came to smash the barnacle encrusted traditions that bind us, holding us back from the deep encounter with God and our neighbor. After this morning, nothing, nothing at all, can ever be the same again. Whether woman or man, child or adult, person of color or stranger in the land, God in Jesus Christ has come for us. When we long for Christ, nothing will ever be taken away. And nothing, nothing at all, could be more important than following Jesus. Amen.

The Rev. Jeff Bullock  
Trinity, Bend, Oregon