

Martha and Mary



Luke 10:42 "(And Jesus said) 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.'"

The short and familiar story of Martha and Mary of Bethany always seems to spell trouble when it occurs in the lectionary cycle. Whenever I have preached upon this text in the past, people afterwards always complain and criticize, saying things like: "I don't think Jesus was very fair to Martha," or "No one would ever eat if we all acted like Mary," or "what is the 'one thing' that is needful?"

In the story, of course, Martha caught up in her domestic duties and becomes distracted that she is doing all the work herself. Barging out from the kitchen, she demands of Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." This is an aspect of the story we can usually all identify with ourselves, that sense of frustration and impatience when we are busy with our work while others do not help, the stress of overload and responsibility. It is just this kind of behavior that makes Martha so real, so human, so much like us. Our general defensiveness for Martha betrays our prejudices and our lifestyle.

It is the response of our Lord to Martha that is so troubling in this story. Jesus, sounding like character in a Brady Bunch episode, declares, "Martha, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." Now if we are bothered with Jesus' response here, I can assure you that we are not the first generation to be so. It seems that the early Christians also had their qualms about Jesus' reply, for there are at least five different variant readings in the ancient manuscripts of what exactly Jesus said to Martha, a clear indication that early scribes were uncomfortable or confused by Jesus' words and sought somehow to

correct or clarify them. So, take heart, we are not the first ones to get edgy about this attitude of Jesus.

In the Middle Ages, the Church came up with the clever solution to this problem by declaring that this story reflects the two basic approaches to our Christian faith, namely the active and contemplative lifestyles. Eventually the Church made it clear that the contemplative approach was limited to the lives of monks, nuns, priests, and bishops, the so-called 'religious' of the medieval world, so you all are off the hook with that kind of thinking.

Moreover, throughout the Middle Ages, perhaps right up until this century, the contemplative life was always considered the 'higher calling', and maybe that is part of our irritation. The choice of prayer and meditation (sitting at Jesus' feet as Mary did) has been treated as 'holier' than worldly demands and duties (like Martha in the kitchen). Historically speaking the religious life was unfortunately regarded as being more godly than that of parents, merchants, laborers, teachers, tradesmen, cooks, scholars, and street sweepers. Throughout much of history Marthas have been seen as inferior to the Marys.

Maybe a bit of this prejudice still lingers among some of us, but I suspect that in our day the pendulum has finally begun to swing back in the opposite direction. Today we are more likely to extol and admire the busy people, the high achievers,

the movers and the shakers. We are a generation of doers. And prayer is not high on the to-do list of many of us.

Contemplation is generally not regarded as a part of our everyday affairs. It is more for those, perhaps, who can't make it in the 'real' world.

Either way, I am not happy with this kind of interpretation of this passage. For I do not believe that this story really attempts to justify one way of life above the other at all. I do not accept that these two aspects of our lives should ever have been considered split apart to begin with, and I don't think that is what Jesus is about here. We all need a bit of both Mary and Martha in our lives; we need the two of them to balance one another to get along, and not go causing trouble for each other. I do not believe that this story is meant to be a commentary on the divided virtues between service versus worship, or social activism versus personal piety, faith versus works, traditional feminine roles versus modern ones, and so on.

And focusing on the tension between Martha and Mary in this story misses, I think, the liberating message of this Gospel here, a message not always obvious to our culture and to our ear. For instance, we are told that it was Martha who invited Jesus to their home. For a Jewish woman of that century to be the head of our household was a great tragedy. It means that she was either a widow or never married; it means that she had

virtually no position in society, a situation generally seen as a sign of God's displeasure. Such women were expected to be as invisible as possible, and to cling quietly to what little life their culture offered them. Yet Martha went out into the public square and openly invited this rabbi into her house. That was of unheard of in the Jewish culture of that time. Women were not permitted to go around inviting guests into their homes, especially single men. For there is no mention of brother Lazarus being anywhere around in this story. Her actions then are both bold and reckless, striking out against convention, ignoring propriety, and was totally scandalous. No doubt, people would talk. I think we see here in Martha something of the impact of Jesus on those around them. We see his redemptive deliverance at work here. For Jesus too did not accept the social norms of his day. He famously ate with sinners and tax-collectors. He let a prostitute wash his feet at the house of Pharisee. He did not see women as inferior beings, and he did not restrict his interaction with them by local custom and understanding, remember the story of his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well for instance, or the Syro-Phoenician woman at Tyre and Sidon. Somewhere earlier, Martha had already come under the liberating influence of the Man from Nazareth that enabled her to boldly go against convention and invite this man to dinner. Don't lose sight of that part of this tale.

Then we see Mary sitting at Jesus' feet. She's not praying or meditating, but sitting at the master's feet listening to what he was saying. That expression "sitting at the feet of the master" was the established way of stating that a person was receiving formal instruction from a rabbi. But here it is a woman who is receiving such instruction, the first recorded case of such historically, and that was strictly forbidden in those days. For women were not allowed to be educated in this way. As one famous Rabbi put it, "Better the Scriptures be burnt than taught to a woman!" Another wrote, "It is better to teach your daughter to be a prostitute than to teach her the Scriptures." So, what is really going on here? Is this really a story about the active and contemplative aspects of our faith, or is this a story about how Martha and Mary had come under the liberating influence of Jesus' good news. For Mary feels free to sit at his feet just as a male disciple would, and just as Martha did in inviting Jesus into her home.

What we have here in this household, I think, is a radical change of the way things were. Of Jesus turning the world upside down, or perhaps, more accurately right side up. Mary and Martha are part of the new face of humanity that comes through the redemptive influence of Jesus. And so maybe, just maybe, what is really happening in this story is that Martha acts in a liberating way herself but fails to appreciate and accept the

liberation of her sister Mary. Perhaps this is a story about liberation, and about accepting such not only for ourselves, but also accepting it for others around us.

This story reminds me of a friend of mine in the late nineteen-seventies who was getting remarried in the Episcopal Church because the conservative non-denominational congregation of his fiancé, where they had been active members, would not allow or tolerate divorce and remarriage in their midst. So, this friend was delighted to find himself accepted and welcomed into the local Episcopal congregation where he lived, and where they were happily married, and so what did he do then, how did he respond to this openness and acceptance? He went around constantly complaining about the Episcopal Church's new liberal stance on woman's ordination! He wanted the liberating line of acceptance to include him, a divorcee, but not necessarily others.

Is that what is really happening in this story between Martha and Mary? Is this the story of resisting the ever-expanding lines of liberation and redemption? Like the demand for stricter immigration laws by the descendants of past émigrés, to restrict others but not them nor their forebears. Like the limiting of newcomers and outsiders into our communities, when of course, we were all once a newcomer and an outsider? "Martha, Martha, you are so anxious and troubled about

many things; one thing only is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, and it shall not be taken away from her."

The one thing absolutely necessary is for all of us to learn from Jesus; to sit at his feet and absorb his graciousness and generosity as he reaches out his arms of liberation upon the hard wood of the Cross to embrace us all; sinners and tax-collectors, Greeks and Jews, free men and slaves, male and female, straight and gay. The good portion of the Gospel is God's love and acceptance of us all, that wonderful and sacred mystery, "hidden for ages and generations," says St. Paul in today's epistle, "but now made manifest to God's saints." So let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made. AMEN.