

Sermon #8 FINAL Mary, Martha, and me
Year C
Luke 10: 38-42:
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer. Amen

Good morning.

In the week before my ordination last month on June 8th, I thought of Martha every day. Every single day.

I thought of her because my dear friend, Ted, a retired Episcopal priest and mentor to me had said, "Before your ordination why don't you go up to Holy Cross and spend a few days at the monastery and spend some time thinking about what this all means?"

But instead, I cooked, shopped, did laundry, scrubbed the bathroom, vacuumed, changed the sheets, swept the patio, cleared away the clutter and worked at the hospital every day. I was in full Martha mode, surrendering to the tyranny of the "shoulds." But each time I thought of my friend Ted, I felt guilty. I thought of Mary and the silent beauty and peace of the monastery on the banks of the Hudson and kept plowing ahead, making my house ready, not for the Lord, but for my guests.

In short, I had done exactly what Thomas Merton, Trappist Monk and author described like way:

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to the violence of our times.

So suffice it to say, that when I looked up the text for my sermon—the first one I preached since being ordained- and saw that it was Martha and Mary I thought, “Oh, no. Too ironic.”

Mary and Martha, Martha and Mary, the maddening scripture that’s been annoying, confusing, and often infuriating women for 2,000 years.

“I hate this text,” my best friend from seminary, Renee, exclaimed. “Why should women have to choose? I love Martha. She’s always short-changed. What guru doesn’t want a woman sitting at his feet?”

I doubt there is a woman in this congregation who doesn’t resonate with these words, even if the tone feels harsh. Marthas make things happen. Get the job done. Jesus didn’t choose his disciples from monasteries. They walked away from their lives and families to follow him; the Marthas stayed behind, the invisible women of his world. The text pits sisters against each other and Jesus does not do anything to resolve the tension his visit has created. How different if he’s said to

Martha, “You’re right. Join us. We’ll help pull something together afterwards or order in Chinese.”

Jesus’s rebuke sounds as cruel as it is dismissive: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.” Like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, Martha is understandably, if not justifiably resentful, at the unfairness of it all. I can easily identify with her seething resentment.

And perhaps that’s the point. It’s Martha’s anxiety, distraction, judgement, and determination to do things her way that’s problematic. Yikes. How often does my way feel like the only way? Too often. Just ask my sister.

But maybe it’s the texts that make me recoil that have the most to teach. The classic interpretation of this all-too familiar story is that Jesus is valuing the sacred, contemplative life, over the secular one. For me, that’s not much help. There has to be something more for me to feel any liberating power in this gospel.

The liberating power is often that these texts resonate with every age and are

made new within us. Those who believe every word in the Bible is true, sacrifice interpretation for absolutism. A great loss.

Sin is not the only thing that separates us from God. Our anxiety and distraction certainly does, too. What is “the better part” that Mary has chosen? For me it is her intention. She has offered Jesus, “the hospitality of her heart.” In the words of Episcopal priest and author, Suzanne Guthrie, who points out that Martha is offering hospitality too, which should never be discounted. But it’s sabotaged by her anxiety and resentment and those “shoulds.”

Says Guthrie:

Like a ballet master, Jesus offers the correction Martha needs to put her in the right balance and direction. I’d like to think of her laughing, if not in the flush of the stressful moment, at least by the time she’d sat down to eat supper herself. And maybe she took that rebuke and turned it into a discipline of virtue.

Another way to liberate this text from its stale predictability is suggested by Rev. David Lose, who points out that Jesus is breaking a cultural and gender norm in elevating Mary to the status of disciple. She is listening and learning from a rabbi, or teacher, a role denied to women in 1st century Palestine.

His point is that that what we read as Jesus’ rebuke was actually an invitation,

God's invitation. to see more in ourselves than we've previously understood or imagined. Mary's act, in sitting at the feet of Jesus was radical. The "better part" that she has chosen is to imagine herself in a new and liberating way.

One of the essays I wrote in my ordination process was titled, "A Place Beyond Imagining" which I believe is where God calls us all.

It's God who is continually offering to make more of us if we open ourselves and listen. Mary was listening with an open heart. Martha, not so much. She was focused on what should be. Mary on what might. As I wound my way through seminary, I was convinced I would never be ordained. Couldn't imagine it. Not for a minute.

Yet here I am.

"You never wanted to preach," my friend Ted reminded me, a few days ago in Santa Fe, shortly before we went white water rafting on the Rio Grande.

"Well, I what I really meant was I didn't want to be a parish priest."

"But you're preaching," he said.

Indeed I am. The Martha and me is alive and well, and for that, I say thanks be to

God. What I missed in the week before my ordination was that my guilt was just that. Mine. Like Mary, I have been called to a place beyond imagining, but one, where once I arrived, knew I belonged. I dare you now to listen and imagine a place beyond imagining to where God is calling you. AMEN