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Those with Ears to Hear

Verna Dozier was a long-time educator and scholar, a champion of bible study for all, a prophet to the laity and an apologist for the church to be the Body of Christ, rather than an institution. As you might expect, she loved to stir things up. In her book *The Dream of God*, she wrote:

“The Church lost its calling to be the new thing in the world when it decided to worship Jesus instead of follow him.”<sup>1</sup>

She goes on: “Worship is setting Jesus on a pedestal, distancing him, enshrining (enshrouding) him in liturgies, stained glass windows, biblical translations, medallions, pilgrimages to places where he walked – the whole nine yards. Following him is doing what he did, weeping over a situation that was so far removed from the dream of God and spending his life to make it different. Following is discipleship.” (74-75).

Now that definition should make any liturgist squirm. But I think Jesus would approve. At least the Jesus dining with Martha and Mary in today’s Gospel from Luke would. I think he’d say “that’s exactly my point, Verna, well done.”

Over the years I’ve had a lot of different feelings about this story of Martha and Mary. Sometimes I’ve felt bad for Martha, getting admonished by Jesus for being distracted by all the serving that she was doing. I know many women who called themselves “Martha’s” for being such busy doers, especially when it came to domestic roles or church service. And her sister Mary has often been lifted up for her quiet, passive role sitting at Jesus’ feet – never a word, let alone a criticism. For some, the moral of the story is that women shouldn’t complain or be snarky about their limited role in ministry, but should be quiet and submissive.

But I don’t think Verna Dozier or Jesus had this kind of disciple in mind, given the dynamic work that goes into proclaiming the Kingdom of God that is at hand. And today’s story is about discipleship. In fact, it comes right on the heels of the discussion that the scholar of the law began last week when he asked “What must I do to have eternal life?” and “who is my neighbor?”

The story of Martha and Mary addresses what it means to welcome Jesus and the Word of God he proclaims with all of one’s heart, and soul mind and strength, which is the same as loving God.

When Jesus and his followers arrive at Martha’s house they are at the start of his long journey to Jerusalem. At the very beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke he has called his 72 disciples and given them instructions on how to prepare the towns for his arrival:

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<sup>1</sup> The Dream of God, page 74

<sup>5</sup> *Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!'* <sup>6</sup> *And if a person of peace is there, your peace will rest on that person, but if not, it will return to you.* <sup>7</sup> *Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid."*

*Jesus adds this instruction as well: "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."*

So this is the model that Jesus is following when he approaches Martha's house. And Martha has indeed welcomed Jesus with a level of attention not unlike that which Abraham provided his angelic visitors in the first reading from Genesis. Martha is a woman who takes hospitality seriously – it is a huge value among the people Israel. And Jesus takes his mission very seriously as he sets about proclaiming the Kingdom to Martha's household – we know this because Martha's sister Mary is sitting at his feet, which is the traditional location of a rabbi's disciples. She is listening avidly, much to her sister's chagrin.

Because Mary is transgressing. She is not helping to offer hospitality. She is a woman sitting in the company of men in a place reserved for men, before a male rabbi. And frankly she's being no help to Martha at all. And all of that is too much for Martha, who asks Jesus to intervene. She essentially says: Put my sister back in her place where she belongs in those familiar institutional roles of offering hospitality and staying clear of men's spaces and what is discussed in them – even if it's the very Word of God.

But Mary is also obeying – she is obeying the pull of the Word of God and she is responding to it with her whole heart, her whole soul, her whole mind and all her strength. This is the attention that Jesus is looking for when he brings the news of the Kingdom into the households that are spread all along the way to Jerusalem. This is what he wants more than a hot meal. He wants to feed the people in their houses with the Word of God.

This is what Jesus is doing on his long road to Jerusalem, with the conviction that *whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me*.

This is a visit that changes everything, and it also really messes with the system that has been in place since Moses. Consider that in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus casts the one who shows mercy, the one truly living the law, as the marginalized Samaritan and not the scrupulous students of Torah.

Taken together, the Good Samaritan and Martha's sister Mary are model disciples: those who hear the word of God and do it."<sup>2</sup> And this is over and against those who put the institution and its laws and practices over and above the new inbreaking Kingdom of God.

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<sup>2</sup> **New Interpreters Bible – Luke 10:38-42 – Martha and Mary – R Alan Culpepper commentator**

It would be like someone bragging about having the great violinist Izaak Perlman over for the dinner. “He even brought his violin and played for us,” they might say. Oh my, what was that like, we might ask? “Oh I have no idea, I was in the kitchen the whole time.”

To have had the opportunity to have had Jesus over for dinner and then allow social conventions to keep you, or others, from hearing the words of Eternal life, that’s actually a bit shocking. But not unheard of, or the story wouldn’t have been included among those that the early church told its members about what true discipleship entails.

One commentator, drawing on Luke’s story of the Sower and the Seed, likened the character of Martha to the seed planted among thorns -- “those who hear the word, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is inviting Martha to mature from host to disciple, to become both a receiver and a doer of the word, a path her sister has already chosen. And Jesus is inviting us to mature as well in our capacity to both give and receive in our relationship with God and our neighbor in our practice as disciples.

This is a challenge that hits home for me, a servant of both the Body of Christ and the institution that is church. And when I hear this story I have to ask myself, which sister am I today? Because they are both sides of the coin of discipleship. This is not a story that is about womens’ roles in the church. It is about all disciples, and whether we are willing to engage in the radical mutual relationship that Jesus asks of us – tend his body, feed his sheep, and be fed in turn upon the Word that God is speaking in the encounter.

Inviting ourselves and others into relationships of mutuality, rather than hierarchy or privilege, is just as challenging today as it was 2000 years ago. There are hidden power dynamics here that are being brought into the light.

It is easy to get caught up in the business and the busyness of the institutional requirements of our religion. The staff, the bills, the questions of growth, who has arrived, who has gone away sad, the responsibilities. This is of course needful work. But to do this without the Word of God ringing in our ears, without placing ourselves at the feet of Jesus and listening wide-eyed, is to set ourselves outside of the relationship Christ desires to have with his body, the people of the church.

In the end when asked what Jesus said that time we had him over for dinner, we don’t want to be in the embarrassing position of saying “I don’t know, I was too busy doing the dishes, or working the grill.”

Amen? Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Culpepper