

## PENTECOST VI Proper 11 Holy Baptism St. Alban's S.I.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

---

The story of Mary and Martha is both familiar and puzzling--- puzzling because Jesus is not saying the things we expect to hear from him. In Luke's account, it comes immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan, so it's fairly clear that Luke intended to make connections between the two stories. Because of its familiarity, the story of Mary and Martha has a rather long tradition of accumulating interpretations so that the reader or listener today has many options for discerning the meaning of the narrative.

In one influential interpretation, Mary is viewed as illustrative of the *contemplative life* while Martha is seen as representing the *active life*. Alternatively, Martha is viewed as a symbol of *this world*, while Mary is a symbol of *the world to come*.

In another interpretation (unfortunately one linked with a history of anti-Jewish polemics), Martha represents *salvation by the law* and Mary *salvation by faith*. Thus, during the Reformation, Mary came to symbolize *justification by faith* (the view promoted by Luther) and Martha the Catholic view of *salvation by works*. In a contemporary variation, the story is seen as teaching that God blesses both types of women and both kinds of lives.

In the modern world, some have seen the story as one that tells women that they need to balance their homemaking duties with their religious responsibilities or that they should balance both careers and home life.

Feminists, of course, view this narrative as supporting careers over homemaking. And, in scholarship focusing on the early church, it is seen as reflecting the debate over leadership roles in the emerging institution. Finally, there are a number of contemporary scholars who see this tale as a call to discipleship in a way which is similar, but not identical, to the parable of the Good Samaritan.

But to concentrate for the moment on the links between the Good Samaritan story and that of Jesus with Mary and Martha, let's look at the contrasts. The lawyer, for example, is told to "continually do this" or "keep on doing this – which could be seen as becoming the "busy-ness" of Martha. But Martha is told that she is too distracted and pre-occupied and should follow the example of Mary who has "chosen the better part."

One prominent scholar suggests that the contrast is not between doing service and listening, but rather, "*hearing* the word" and "*anxious*" behavior which is the very antithesis of discipleship. This is because worrying can be either an indication of unbelief or of lack of trust in God. In the first century,

no one would have expected both a Samaritan who cares and helps and a woman who sits and listens to be disciples.

To examine this theme a bit further, even though there is nothing negative suggested about the nature of Martha's welcome, it is with respect to her hospitality that she is contrasted with Mary. In Luke's gospel, serving is normally a positive quality, but here it is marked by distractions and worry that conflict with the growth of authentic faith.

Jesus does not criticize Martha for her 'service' but for her worries and anxieties about many things --- a life pulled in too many different directions. Additionally, Martha was so anxious about *doing* that she had trouble *hearing* the word of God.

In family therapy, the concept of *the triangle* is central. That is, the ways in which people act and influence one another when the grouping involves *three people*, which is frequent. For example, when Martha appears to be uncomfortable with Mary and "*triangles in*" Jesus, she doesn't directly ask Mary for help, but puts Jesus in the middle. One way of dealing effectively with the consequences of triangular relationships is to try to maintain a "non-anxious presence" when drawn into the dynamic. This tends to reduce anxiety in others. Jesus here maintains that kind of presence. Notice how this kind of stance tends to work against combativeness.

One of the problems with this text is familiarity itself. This means that preaching on it can be "fraught with difficulty." For example, it can be turned into "a moralistic little lesson" about discipleship or "a mere metaphor" for a number of different possibilities no one can agree upon. It is frequently used to "prove that hearing the word of God is just generally more important than doing and being busy" which oversimplifies the thrust of the passage and reduces its effectiveness by limiting its message to a kind of truism. These gospel vignettes, like parables, are meant to provoke thought, to raise questions rather than answer them, to get us to think instead of providing us with built-in simplistic answers. Whenever we are led to find the easy answer, we can be pretty certain that what we've concluded is inadequate to describe the purpose of the passage.

That it must have concern hospitality is quite likely because in Luke's gospel, the idea of hospitality plays a large role. Thus, it probably has to do with answering the question: how do we *receive* Jesus? It's also important to note that in episodes highlighting meals and other hospitality events, the concept of service itself is central to a complete understanding of what is being taught. Martha's distraction and worry, for example, "leave no room for the most important aspect of hospitality --- gracious attention to the guest." These things "prevent her from being truly present with Jesus and cause her to drive a wedge between her sister and herself, and between Jesus and herself (the three parts of this particular human triangle.)"

But though these things are certainly true, they omit any commentary on the context --- the location, time and social setting. And this is important because culture tends to dictate behavior and the thrust of what we say to one another in hospitality events. So, to explore this a bit further, let me describe a contemporary interpretation of today's gospel which concentrates on messages embedded in the text which take some exposition to fully grasp. This particular view comes from N. T. Wright, the famous British scholar and former Bishop of Durham whose insights are frequently very valuable.

Wright says that we miss a lot if we overlook the cultural context and the clues enfolded into this scene. In Wright's view, what Jesus is really doing in this story is "redrawing the boundaries between men and women within Israel, blurring lines which had been clearly laid down" over the centuries.

So, it isn't the workload that is dividing Mary and Martha. Nor is it the jealousy of two women competing for the attentions of a man. The real problem was that "Mary was behaving as if she were a man." In the first century, houses were divided between male and female roles, and those roles were strictly enforced. "Mary had crossed an invisible but very important boundary within the social world" of the time.

Public rooms were occupied by men. The kitchen and "other quarters unseen by outsiders" were women's areas. Males and females only mixed in the married bedroom or in outside children's play. So, for a woman to sit down comfortably with men and assume a role of equality bordered "on the scandalous." Only shameless women behaved this way.

It wasn't a matter of superiority or inferiority but of what were considered the appropriate roles for men and women in the larger culture. "In the context in which the event occurred, the episode was shocking, not for reproving Martha, but for praising Mary. As far as Jesus' own culture was concerned, Martha was in the right. She knew how to serve itinerant rabbis, how to treat guests with honor. She knew that her place was back in the kitchen. The apostles probably expected Jesus to rebuke Mary, because she was breaking the rules."

In speaking to Martha, Jesus at one point says, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of *only one thing*. In the logic of Jesus, that one thing is "the best part" which Mary has chosen.

So, as far as Jesus is concerned as he commissioned his disciples, "hearing the word of God's messenger is the one thing needed, not providing for his physical needs."

If you sat at the feet of a teacher in antiquity, you were assuming a male role. To sit there simply meant that you were a student of the teacher in question. If you sat at the feet of a rabbi, you were indicating that you wished to be a rabbi yourself.

For Jesus, of course, Mary has every right to sit at his feet. But Jesus was not evaluating people on the basis of "abstract egalitarianism;" he was basing his judgments on his understanding of the "the

overflowing love of God, which, like a great river breaking its banks into a parched countryside, irrigates those parts of human society which until now had remained barren and unfruitful.”

He saw in Mary a human being who perceived that God was calling her to listen carefully so that she would understand the meaning of the kingdom of God as Jesus taught it.

By contrast with earlier interpretations, this story is unlikely to be principally about active and contemplative models of spirituality. No. What this is more truly about is “the boundary-breaking call of Jesus” which was a difficult message to communicate to a group of traditional Jews in first century Palestine but was clearly a major focus of his teaching as demonstrated through countless gospel accounts. And it was a message which, in time, was going to utterly transform the world. This story is about the protest of Jesus against the rules and boundaries set by the culture in which he lived.”

It is the very kind of thing that was constantly getting him into trouble, the kind that ultimately led to his betrayal by some of the very people who appeared to be in agreement with him when first they were exposed to his message. They were listening but not hearing. It was ever thus. **In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

#### Sources:

- N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, London, 2001
- Scott Hoezee, “Proper 11C, The Lectionary Gospel,” [Center for Excellence in Preaching](#), Calvin Seminary
- Brian Stoffregen, “Luke 10: 38-42, Proper 11-Year C,” *Exegetical Notes*, [Crossmarks Christian Resources](#)
- Clara Beth Speel van de Water, “Interpretations of Luke 10: 38-42,” [https://department.monm.edu/classics/Speel\\_Festschrift/vandewater.htm](https://department.monm.edu/classics/Speel_Festschrift/vandewater.htm)
- Elizabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Luke 10: 38-42,” *Working Preacher* (commentary id=1723)
- Mikeal C. Parsons, “Commentary on Luke 10: 38-42,” *Working Preacher*, (commentary id=2917)