

Martha, Mary, and Jesus Sunday 20,25

Are you anxious and troubled about many things? It may be some of us are – it seems almost a part of daily living now. Take time to breathe we often say to one another, give yourself a break, we suggest; remember to take time for yourself, we advise.

Jesus said, “Martha, Martha you are anxious and troubled about *many* things.... Martha was quiet for a moment and then she said, “you have spoken rightly, Lord. I will be at peace.” Then, she sat down with the other disciples, Mary, and Jesus. They all sat to listen to Jesus, and they talked, told stories of the road and laughed now and again. Finally, when the hour grew late, they all got up, prepared a meal for themselves, and then helped Martha with the tasks of ministry she had temporarily set aside. You have not heard that in the gospel before – I present it to you as a possibility.

We don't know what happened after the exchange between Jesus and Martha, the scripture does not tell us more of this moment or more about Martha until later in John's gospel when Lazarus falls ill and she and Mary send for Jesus. When Jesus comes, Martha goes out to meet Jesus on the road as he returns at the death of Lazarus and says to him in a stunningly familiar way, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” During these private moments with Jesus, we hear her confess she believes He is the resurrection and the Life – an acknowledgement of his divinity! We learn in the gospels that Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were our Lord's friends, their home a place of respite, refreshment, and friendship. They are the only persons named by Jesus as being loved by him.

Jesus us calls us to be free of anxiety and of fear of failing, and of not fulfilling the expectations of a society that would bind us to its values first, relegating some to a silent place on the edges. Those that believed in him would be free, Jesus said; and he went about shattering the unseen, but powerful bonds of religious and social expectations that constrained women (and others) in a diminished life without voice or self-determination. Those moments in the home of Martha, of which we have just heard, are the Exodus moment for Martha and Mary. Not entirely unlike what Jesus says to the complaining Pharisees when his disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath – ‘the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’.

Usually, we hear this pericope as a value difference between quiet listening and learning and active doing and serving, even sometimes as a value difference between women called to serve in the religious life and women called to serve in secular life. Bonnie Thurston in her scholarly work, “Women in the New Testament” argues that it is not so, but rather the necessity of the two sides of the same coin. Jesus is not scolding Martha; he is encouraging her. A careful today’s pericope allows us to hear it as a call to be at peace in her work and enjoy his presence. Hurry, even rushing is not the problem. Every woman knows there are times when what needs to be done needs to be done now without delay. Men know this too. There is no blame in rushing.

Genesis: Abraham is in a rush, first he dashes into the tent to tell Sarah to make bread cakes, even going so far as to tell her how and how much, then he dashes off to the herd for a calf, then takes the calf to the servants, makes sure they know to not delay – make it snappy, so to speak, lastly when the meat and bread are ready, he takes curds, and milk, and all the food prepared, puts it before his guests, and

then stands watching them eat. When they ask about Sara, Abraham who has been watching them from under a tree, casually replies she is in the tent. We know she was quietly listening to what was being said by those outside the tent.

In this scene between Jesus and Martha (Mary is present but silent) is an echo of the parable we heard last week – of the Good Samaritan wherein the priest and the Levite avoid the injured man in order not become ritually unclean. Similar to that parable, these moments with Jesus, Martha (and Mary) are iconoclastic and reveal the assumptions that bind us, one could say imprison us.

Jesus speaks to Martha as an equal, more than surprising in 1st century Jewish culture, but also for Martha to ask an honored guest to involve himself in a family matter is also more than a little surprising. A bit like hosting the Archbishop of Canterbury, then asking him to intervene in a dispute with your sister over what tasks she should be handling. What Jesus invites is: be at peace even in the moments of demand and distress, I am here with you.

And, there is more. Remember, it is Martha's home, it was she who did the inviting, so she definitely wants to hear and be with Jesus. And yet, something has drawn her away. It is almost as if Jesus was saying again, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. If necessary, break the rules, be free, listen and become fully Martha... be all that God has called you to be. An Exodus Moment, if you will. Adherence without question to rules and expectations distorts vision and muffles the cry for mercy and justice. Hearing the gospel message is half the story, responding to the gospel in one's life is the other half of the story.

Most definitely, the pericope is not about what activities have more favor with our Lord or about being conformist or submissive vs assertive and /or active. Jesus does not pit woman against woman, nor one ministry against another. Mary is allowed to sit with the other disciples, likely all males at this point – but maybe not. **Martha is trying to finish up some task before joining the group – notice there is no reference to food or a meal in the scripture**, and what Jesus says reminds her he is there at her invitation. Come and join in, he seems to say – let the other things go for NOW. Occasionally, there are moments in our lives we are called to recognize – in the instant, in the moment – something out of the ordinary that takes precedence over the norm, and also points to something deeper.

With Jesus, there is always enough time for love and gratitude. However, for many, the obligations of life often crowd out time for sharing love of Jesus, gratitude, and faith. So how might we do this? We could begin by reminding ourselves to ask what guest have we invited into our home? If we have invited Jesus first into our home, then he is the honored guest, and best honored by remembering his presence and his word in our work and play.

Martha, responsible and loving, but too busy?; Mary loving and listening, but forgetful of responsibility? What matters is that they were his friends and followers. Sisters, each at a different moment on their individual journey with Jesus. As we zip down the roads of our lives, we are all at different mile-markers – so to speak. The necessary part is to remember we are not alone on that road, Jesus – the honored and beloved guest – is with us all the way. It is up to us as to whether or not we permit the various demands and circumstances of life to make us forgetful of His presence. He calls to each of us, in moments of stress, or demanding activity,

and concerns, “you are anxious and troubled by many things.” “Be at peace. Know my peace that passes all understanding.”

And so, we may pray: Holy Spirit, give us the wisdom to know when to sit at the Lord’s feet and when to rise up, knowing Jesus is with us, and take up our tasks with love and peace. Amen.