

Sermon
Proper 11, Year C
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by the Rev. Norman Bray

Do you ever feel like you have heard these gospel stories so many times that there really can't be anything new to say about them? Today's short gospel could be one of those, I think. The story of Mary and Martha is so familiar; surely we get it by now. Oh, if that were only true!

This story has so often been used to justify and sanctify the roles of women as homemakers that it has become a cliché. We have busy Martha in the kitchen, trying to pull together dinner for no telling how many people who just happened to drop by; and Mary is in the common room with the men, listening to what Jesus had to say, not lifting a finger to help. How many times have you ladies been hard at work in the kitchen preparing a big meal, maybe Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner, while everyone else was in the living room telling stories, talking, sharing their lives, or maybe even watching a football game, and you would have liked to be out there with them but if you are out there, who is going to finish the dinner? Doesn't that sound like what Martha is saying? How about a little help so that I can listen too! Surprise, that is not what is going on here at all. The problem in this story is that Mary has violated hundreds of years of tradition and probably broke the law as well by being in the common room with a group of men. Martha has plenty to do and she could use some help but her real concern is that her sister is causing a scandal in their home. Two thousand years ago women were only around the men where the children were playing or in the privacy of the married bedroom. The lives of women and men were separate by custom and so Mary was causing a scandal by sitting in the room with all of the men, listening to what Jesus had to say. The problem with the law comes in here; by sitting at the feet of Jesus and being attentive to what he was teaching, Mary was presenting herself as a student of Scripture, as someone studying to be a rabbi! Scandal! Women were not allowed to study the Torah; they were not even allowed to touch the sacred scrolls. This was Martha's real problem; her sister had broken both social boundaries and religious laws by sitting and studying at the feet of the Master.

In the gospels, we are accustomed to hearing Jesus break down barriers that stood in the way of true faith and real justice. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers, he healed on the Sabbath, and he rebuked those scribes who "swallowed the property of widows." To us, it is obvious what the lesson is in those stories but in today's gospel it is much more subtle. In last Sunday's gospel we heard the story of the Good Samaritan and we understood that all humans are our neighbors, regardless of tribe, creed, and religion. In that story is pretty easy to understand what Jesus is trying to say, but today's lesson is not so obvious, but it is still about boundaries that attempt to keep us separated from God and Jesus will not stand for that. There have been some people who have taken this lesson as evidence that Jesus was a supporter of women's liberation and there is some truth in that but that does not go far enough. Jesus was all about **HUMAN LIBERATION**, about breaking down the barriers that we erect ourselves to try and regulate our availability to God's grace. I think that it is funny that these barriers are not real impediments, they are more like imaginary boundaries that we put around ourselves or around others in an attempt to exert control over that than cannot be controlled. The

love of God for us, the grace that God makes available to us wells up and flows all over us and around us like a river that is at flood, nothing man-made can stand in the way. That is the message that Jesus sends us through this encounter with Martha and Mary, Mary chose worship and study of God's word, Mary chose the better part and that will not be taken away.

We have the opportunity to make that same choice, to choose that "better part" every day when we decide how to order our day. Does prayer and study of the scriptures play an important role in your day? If not then you are missing that "better part" and your days will be filled with the busyness of the world rather than the gifts that we have received from Christ Jesus. I want to make something very clear though about the role that Martha played in this story. There is work that must be done, everyday, meals must be cooked, wages must be earned, homes must be tended to, but there is another part of our lives that is also important and that is that "better part" that Jesus spoke of. I do think that it is possible to live a life that is completely engaged with the worship of God and the study of the scriptures. Everything that we do can be expressed as prayer or worship but most of us aren't there yet and so we have to separate our lives into the demands of the world and prayer and worship. It is hard to deny the demands that the world makes on us, we all want to care for our families and ourselves and provide a life that is comfortable and have a few nice things and I am certainly not saying that we have to live the lives of an ascetic to be acceptable to God, but I am saying that there are ways to integrate work and prayer and worship in such a way that our secular needs and wants are satisfied while we pray.

I want to be clear about something else in today's gospel. Martha is not the bad guy, Martha is doing the best that she knew how to do, she was taking care of the household and providing food for the guests, important jobs that have to be done. She had the disadvantage of living in a culture, in a world, that so tightly defined her role that she could not imagine doing what her sister did. The early Christian communities learned from the gospel message and women were included in scripture studies and in leadership roles in the community. Martha's service stood as an example to the early church and should stand for us today as an illustration of what it means to serve our community, our church, our families. Jesus came not to be served but to serve and Martha is looked to as an excellent example of what it means to serve without being servile. Service is a virtue, and Martha has been held in high esteem in the Christian church since the earliest times. Remember that in the Gospel of John it is Martha who comes to meet Jesus, while Mary stays at home, and it is Martha who challenges Jesus for not coming sooner when their brother is dying. It is to Martha that Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the light" and it is Martha who says "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." In medieval and Renaissance art Martha is depicted as a dragon tamer, not a dragon slayer like St. George, but a dragon tamer, using reason and rhetoric to persuade and convince, rather than using might to conquer and annihilate.

By now, I hope that you are beginning to see that it is not helpful to choose either Mary's part or Martha's part exclusively. For us there has to be a blending of these roles; an acknowledgement of the importance of service and the realization that prayer and worship must also play a part in our lives. We are all called into service but first we must gather at the feet of Jesus, to listen, to study, to pray, and to worship. The real challenge is to integrate prayer and worship into our work, into our service. Then and only then can we lay our claim to a place in the kingdom of God, which is truly, the better part.

