

Proper 11-C RCL
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St. Stephen's, Spokane

Back in the 1980s I was invited to lead a weekend retreat for clergy spouses (realistically speaking, it was clergy wives in those days). I was really pleased and honored to do that retreat and put some material together that I thought would be helpful. We were looking at "Roads Less Traveled," and I was trying to open up some new ways of looking at some texts. One of the first sessions of the retreat was based on the story of Martha and Mary that we heard this morning from Luke's gospel, a real favorite of mine.

But when I started reading from the gospel, I was pretty sure that I'd made a big mistake. The body language was incredible. I looked out on a chapel where virtually no one was smiling and there were more than a few stony faces. Mary and Martha was clearly not a favorite story for this group. The reason why, some of them told me, was that they felt their lives had been crammed into a stereotype -- that of Martha -- because of their role as a clergy spouse. And they weren't pleased.

What did that look like? Some of the women said that they felt like they were expected to be the hard-workers in the congregation: baking cakes, teaching Sunday school, hosting events in their home, playing the piano and a variety of other things that had to be done to keep things going at the church. It wasn't that they weren't willing to do those things. But, they said, sometimes it was hard to get out of the kitchen, to sit and listen and learn. Things have changed a good bit in the last 20 or 30 years for clergy spouses, but I still remember the "sting" of this story for some of those women.

The truth is, the story of Martha and Mary has inspired some stereotypes that could apply to men or women. Are you a Martha? Busy? Task-oriented? Dependable? Are you a Mary? Contemplative? A listener? Maybe not the one who is going to organize the potluck or the work party.

Luke didn't include this story in his gospel to set up these kind of categories. If anything, Luke's inclusion of this incident shows Jesus behaving in a way that challenged the cultural role of women in his time. For instance, it was really not acceptable for a man to visit women who were not family members. So Jesus was breaking a norm even to spend time with them in Martha's home. It was also breaking a norm for him to be teaching Martha and Mary. This simply was not done. So from the outset, Jesus has treated these women in ways that both asserted their dignity and challenged the cultural norms that would put women in purely domestic roles and pretty much out of sight. Here they are ministering to Jesus.

But beyond that, this is a wonderful and challenging commentary on hospitality and presence. And the tension between the two sisters opens this up for us. Martha, head of the household, busily working in the kitchen – doing the hard work of practical hospitality as she welcomes and ministers to Jesus. Mary, in her own way, sitting with Jesus and listening to him. A different kind of welcome and presence. A different kind of hospitality. Maybe two sides of the same coin.

It kind of comes unraveled as Martha becomes resentful that she's stuck with all the work and appeals to Jesus. Eugene Peterson phrases it this way in the Message: "Master," she says, "don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand." And Jesus replies, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too

much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential and Mary has chosen it – it’s the main course and it won’t be taken from her.” That probably had a bit of a sting.

This is a story that can be infuriating to unravel. For instance, if Martha had chosen that ‘better part’ and simply sat in the living room with Jesus, there would have been no dinner. What’s a hostess to do? This story, in a way, defies practicality. Of course this isn’t a story about how to entertain guests or manage a dinner party. It isn’t a feature in “Good Housekeeping.” It is about hospitality at a much deeper level. Luke is showing that there is value in both women’s way of offering hospitality – but Mary has offered an open-hearted welcome simply by her presence and listening.

One of the things that is so appealing about Luke’s gospel is that we meet people who are a lot like ourselves. And in this story it’s easy to make connections – to see some of our own struggles and foibles – maybe even see some of our family squabbles.

One of the classic ways of looking at this story sees Mary and Martha as metaphors for how we live into our relationship with God – how we welcome God into our lives. Martha, for instance, serves God with energy and passion. She’s industrious, responsible. Her date book is filled with good works. Her spirituality is a spirituality of “doing” -- of “action.” But in her busy-ness, there probably isn’t a lot of space for God in the more traditional way of looking at life. It’s hard for God to get an appointment.

(I once knew a Martha-like woman with a demanding job plus a full schedule of commitments like Habitat for Humanity, a variety of church committees and work with her Rotary Club. She used to write a note on her day-timer every day to remember to

stop and remember that she was in the presence of God – sort of like making an appointment with God every day.)

Mary, on the other hand, has a more contemplative way of welcoming. She's a good listener. Attentive. Focused on the needs of the other. She welcomes Jesus by being present to him in that way rather than seeing to the practical tasks of hospitality. That's what Jesus lifts up in the story.

Sometimes you just need to be present to people, no matter how many tasks need to be done. I have a friend who, when I visit, is like the human tornado. She's hustling around the kitchen, offering four kinds of cookies, six kinds of tea, an array of crackers and other snacks. She's re-arranging the furniture to get it just right. Sometimes I just want to sit down and have a quiet conversation. I want her to be present in a different, less frenetic way.

At the very core, hospitality is about welcoming. About attentiveness to the needs of the other. About putting away our own agenda, our own compulsiveness, our own needs -- to welcome someone into a holy space.

This does not always come naturally. It takes some attentiveness and even some practice to be hospitable in this way. We live in an over-stimulated world. A world of endless activity and distraction. A world of instant communication, relentless e-mail and calls on our cell phones. A little time to give someone our undivided attention can be a huge challenge. But the truth is, most of us just want (and need) someone to give us some undivided attention from time to time.

Sometimes we struggle with this as individuals. Sometimes we struggle with it as churches. How do we welcome the stranger into our midst? How do we create the

welcoming space where we meet God in the other? Those are great questions and challenges for churches – especially the ones that really want to be hospitable and inviting. It really begins with attentiveness. With openness. With focus.

Martha and Mary. To sisters with different styles, different gifts, very different takes on hospitality. Who are the Marys among us? Who are the Marthas? More importantly, how are we all called to offer hospitality in our own unique ways – to invite others into that holy space where they are welcomed at a deeper level?