

“Mary AND Martha”

Luke 10:38-42

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I want to liberate the Mary and Martha story. By that, I mean I want to suggest that we need not see these two sisters as competing, as one being valued more than the other. In the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, we see there is a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to laugh and a time to weep, and so forth. What I know and believe is that there is a time for hospitality and a time for tuning in to the stories of Jesus. There is a time for both. One need not be elevated over the other. In this particular story, listening to the Jesus stories gets the nod, but in other Gospel stories Jesus lifts up hospitality as the higher value. So I invite us to put aside any anxiety over which is better, Mary or Martha. They both have exceptional spiritual gifts.

As I was thinking about this text, the movie, *Deliverance*, came into my head. What I remember most from that film is the song, “Dueling Banjos.” A rag-clad boy from the Appalachian backwoods and a fine-dressed city slicker each has a banjo. One hears the other playing. The other chimes in with a harmony part. They echo each other. They seem to battle each other for dominance. But then, there is a glorious meeting of hearts and minds and fingers on the banjos. The result is a tune that has everyone dancing and feeling alive. It is a sacred moment in the film, and when I recall that melody, it is just as sacred now as it was when I first watched the movie.

I mention this scene in the Burt Reynolds film because the two musicians are as different as are Mary and Martha; yet, when they merge their talents, they make the world go around!

Martha wants to make brownies and lemonade. She wants to fluff up the pillow Jesus is leaning on. She wants to tend to the demands of good hospitality. Not only is there nothing wrong with this, there is much that is right! Hospitality may be the oldest value in all of religious life. Abraham and Sarah offered hospitality to strangers who turned out to be angels! The Widow of Zaraphath offered hospital to Elijah who then saved the life of her son. Jesus, himself, offered radical hospitality to the Samaritan woman at the well. **This is when miracles happen, when hospitality is extended.**

There are only a few survivors now of the 20th Century Halocaust. And they are telling their stories. Ellie Wiesel, who died three years ago, and many others are telling their stories of the radical hospitality of neighbors and strangers who took them in and hid them and fed them and saved their lives. For those Jewish families, hospitality was a matter of life and death. Many of us today, moved by our Christian faith, feel called to be instruments of sanctuary, to open our homes and our churches and our lives to refugees and to others lacking proper documentation. So, I am grateful to Martha and to all the Martha's of this world who offer hospitality in any form. This is where miracles begin!

Now, Mary wants to sit at Jesus' feet and hear his stories; drink in his wisdom; take time for his teachings. She wants to be a student of truth. This, too, matters! I suspect she wants to make God's Word relevant for her life. Do we not all crave this same thing: to make God's Word relevant to our own time, to our own personal situations?

I like to imagine Jesus telling Mary the ancient Moses story, found in the Book of Exodus, of the two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah; how they defied the Pharaoh's order to slay all new-born baby boys, how they chose to claim allegiance to a higher power, how they chose NOT to follow orders when those orders fly in the face of moral teachings. Do you all know Puah and Shiphrah? They become role models for women of faith.

I imagine Mary knew all about Puah and Shiphrah. But perhaps she had a question about their relevance for her. What do those ancient midwives have to do with me? I picture the two of them, Jesus and Mary, talking about what it means to be a midwife: to nurture life, to speak truth to power, to lean on one's faith in a time of crisis. Luke doesn't tell us what exactly Jesus was teaching Mary on that occasion, just that she was making it a priority to make the Word of God relevant.

In a way, this is what church is all about: making God's Word relevant for our daily living, for our pressing decisions, for the quality of life on this planet. In my freshman year in college, I was forced to take a science class. I shied away from tough sounding classes like Chemistry and Physics and Biology. I registered for Geology 101. So did 200 other beginning students. Dr. McGannon lectured to us on igneous and sedimentary and metamorphic rocks with such passion, such joy, such enthusiasm; I wanted to become a geologist! The lecture hall was more like a theatrical stage when Dr. McGannon spoke. I had no idea rocks could be relevant. Dr. McGannon made me a believer. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 8:00 a.m. I sat at his feet and drank in what became for me a whole new way of understanding the universe.

This is how I picture Mary in the story for today. Jesus spoke. Mary listened. They talked. And she gained a new perspective on love, a new perspective on being the good neighbor, a new perspective on abundant life, a new perspective on forgiveness. The Word of God became relevant for her! I am grateful to Mary and to all the Mary's of this world!

This is what I hope for our church school children; for our Wednesday School youth, for all our adults: that the Word of God becomes relevant. Sometimes this happens for us on a Sunday morning; sometimes it happens while listening to sacred music; sometimes it happens while on a walk through Elizabeth Park; sometimes it happens in the midst of a Tuesday Morning Bible class; sometimes it happens in a dream. This is my hope, that the Word be dynamic and life-giving and relevant. Because, when the Word of God becomes relevant, that's when we know we're living in the greatest of hope. Amen!