

Pentecost 8, Year C  
July 18, 2010  
Luke 10:38-42  
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Today's story of Martha, Mary and Jesus, is rather odd to modern ears. Clearly it hinges on the preference Jesus showed for what Mary did over what Martha did, but this is a strangely disturbing preference to most of us. So this morning I want to play around with a few ideas about that odd preference, and see if perhaps we can make some sense of it even now.

It is true that Mary sat and listened with the utmost devotion to Jesus as he spoke, doubtless revealing great truths of life and the Kingdom. Well and good. But Martha fetched the water, stoked the fire, prepared the meal and readied sleeping quarters for thirteen people who had just happened to drop by for a visit. Most of us today – men as well as women - have a hard time understanding how in the world what Mary did is to be preferred to what Martha did. I think it likely that in this era of greater equality of the sexes the logical conclusion of the story would have been for Martha to take the carefully prepared food and feed the goats with it. If Jesus wants a meal he can make it himself – or get Mary to - and then we will see who has chosen “the better part.” Martha, having had a good meal, would then be off to bed and see you in the morning. Or not.

One way of rescuing this passage from that kind of reaction is to suggest, as over a thousand years of monastic tradition has maintained, that this passage is simply asserting that the contemplative life of prayer and meditation is a higher and nobler calling than the active life of living in the world. If that works for you, then fine, but I think it very unlikely that Luke was using this story to offer a favorable evaluation of a way of life that in Christian circles would not surface for several hundred years. It is also clear that the monastic tradition as it developed included plenty of chores and manual labor precisely because in the Benedictine model such efforts were, and are, considered crucial to the proper development of the spiritual life. So that one won't work.

A better try focuses on the psychological aspects of the story. Martha is resentful of Mary because Mary is getting away with not doing the usual work of hospitality, leaving it all for her. The "better part" then is not a particular kind of work, sitting and listening over against cooking and cleaning, but a particular kind of attitude. Mary was doing what she wanted to do, she was sitting at the feet of Jesus. Martha was doing what she didn't want to do, necessary chores, and so she became resentful. Had she understood that what she was doing was just as good a way of expressing her devotion as what Mary was doing she would have delighted in these tasks and so participated in the 'better part' which is simply to understand that what we are called to do in the moment, whatever it might be, is genuine service to God when offered in love.

That is a better try, for we have at least experienced such a thing ourselves. For some people working in the garden, doing the grocery shopping or I dare say writing a sermon, is absolute drudgery. They just hate it even though the demands of their lives require such things of them. For others gardening, shopping and writing sermons are something to look forward to, are moments to get away, or become creative. When a task is drudgery we tend to hate it, and resent those not so tasked. When the same task is a delight it doesn't seem like work at all and we don't care what anyone else is up to because we are doing what we want to be doing. So at least this notion of attitude as being the 'better part' makes sense. Jesus' preference for what Mary was doing was therefore not a denigration of her efforts or an exaltation of Mary's desire to sit and listen. Rather, it was a way of pointing out that resentment gets in the way of spiritual development, and renders ineffective even our best efforts.

I have preached this way before, and I still think there is something important to learn by watching Martha's resentment. But I have also come to believe that this way of understanding Martha is anachronistic; it imparts modern values to an ancient situation. For what is strange about the setting of this story is not that one woman would have done more work than the other. What is strange is that Mary would presume to sit in the company of Jesus and the disciples all by herself. In its setting in ancient Palestine what Mary did was

not actually lazy, it was a bit scandalous; Mary was stepping way outside the bounds of female behavior, and at least part of what Martha was doing was demanding that Jesus put her back in her proper place, not just in that setting and moment, but in society.

That is what Jesus wouldn't do; he would not tell Mary that she had stepped out of bounds, that she had gone beyond the proper limits assigned by the social norms of the day, but instead affirmed her desire to step outside those limits where to do so freed her to move more deeply into genuine discipleship. In this understanding of the passage Jesus' preference is once again not based in sitting and listening over cooking and cleaning. It is instead based in an understanding that sometimes we must free ourselves from the bonds of societal norms that tell us who we are, and what we may and may not do in order to understand the truth depth of our humanity and thus see our proper relationship to God. The "better part" is therefore the willingness to struggle to discern those moments and to act upon them rather than find ourselves entirely within the externally imposed, and internally appropriated dos and don'ts of our social milieu. In the presence of Jesus Mary would not be defined by the role society had given her; she would be defined by her love. That, just perhaps, was the "the better part" Martha could not see or appreciate, for her love, and her devotion could be expressed only within those

very dos and don'ts, and she could not understand, or accept, any other way of being.

Most of us here have felt the constraints placed upon us by expectations, but more often we live with them without even feeling them, so much a part of us are they. This unconsciousness serves us well at times because it gets us through our days pretty smoothly and frees us from unwanted attention and the burden of making hard decisions at difficult moments. But living by rote all the time can hurt us as well, and more than that it can lead us to misunderstand those who step outside of those expectations not simply to gain attention or because they want to change the system, but because they are attracted to what they hear God saying in the moment. Having routines and expectations is good for us; we know this because when we are thrown out of our routines we quickly develop new ones and seek out and accept new expectations. But when our routine deafens us to the voice calling us to step outside it, if only for a moment, then it becomes stifling, and even at times suffocating. Think back for just a moment to last week's lesson, the story of the Good Samaritan, which in Luke's gospel as in our lectionary, comes immediately before this passage for today. Priest and Levite lived entirely within their roles and expectations, and were thus unable to step outside them long enough to discover who neighbor is. Today we see something similar, Martha unable to allow Mary to step

outside the customary role, and so unable to find that life which is calling to her in that moment.

Well, this is the way I can make sense of this story right now. Imagining that the better part is the contemplative life as though the active life was somehow less important simply makes no sense either in the historical context of this story or in the context of the life we all share today. Imagining that Jesus' preference for Mary's choice revolves entirely around the psychological dimensions of Martha's resentment likewise seems odd, since of course Martha would be resentful, who wouldn't? Seeing this story in its context as a further exploration of the boundaries of human social norms and their impact upon the life of the spirit fits both within immediate context of Luke's gospel and what little of the life of Jesus we can glean from the gospels. More than that, it also says something to us today, that quite often without knowing it we hem ourselves in, and those norms and expectations which do often serve us well sometimes prevent us from perceiving God's presence and hearing that Word of life which is always upon us. It doesn't have to be that way. With Mary we can choose 'the better part' which has nothing to do with sitting by while others work, but is rather the willingness to engage ourselves fully in the task of listening for the voice of God in all we do, even when it takes us away from accustomed paths and our own expectations.