

Sermon Notes July 21, 2019 **Focus** Martha and Mary - no zero sum spirituality with a sprinkle of Sarah
Lectionary Readings http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Pentecost/CProp11_RCL.html

This story has been rough on women. In practice, the church allegorizes Mary and Martha's encounter and creates a spiritual winner and a materialistic loser. This is gendered - we wouldn't pit two men against each other in this way. From a feminist perspective, when sister is pitted against sister - both lose.

I have heard dozens of clergy (myself included) say, "I am just not into details, I am a big picture guy." It is highly appropriate to have different roles, different strengths, and effective delegation. But, I have never heard a female clergy utter "I'm not good with details, I'm only a big picture woman." If she did, I imagine it would be noticed as either unusual or negative. If you think I am wrong, I am open to being challenged - I would like to be wrong.

In the Genesis 18 reading today, Abraham sits down with travelers and tells Sarah to get busy making a meal for his heavenly guests. Historically and today, men can *choose* the privilege to act just like Mary or they can be Martha, but Martha's serving is not forced on them. They can *choose* to sit at the front soaking it all in, while doing little to help the party happen. St. Timothy's has a number of men who tirelessly work behind the scenes. I would argue there is a gender choice that is less available to women. Martha is often expected to make the party happen. Abraham didn't get praised as a contemplative; this is just the way it could/should be.

Here's the last part of my gender rant. Men who care about details often get called out for not being a good leader. They are micro-managers. "He's in the weeds again." Instead of a gender trap, I try to ask myself regularly, what does the situation need?

Every problem is a nail when you are only a hammer. The scripture today invites us to nuance. Maybe a situation needs a person to dive in or to jump out. Delegation and empowering people for ministry = fantastic. Can't bothered with details = meh. Let's not try to hit everything with one glorious hammer of our own personality quirks..

The Gospel *A woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*



False split: Active vs Contemplative. If you are prayerfully inclined, you may side with Mary because she got her priorities straight. She knows what is most important. If you empathize with Martha, you know that nothing happens without sweat equity. You are tired of people just expecting things to happen out of thin air. To make things more confusing, Jesus himself sets up a winner and loser in this story.

Mary only "won" the argument at this brief moment in time (at this one dinner.) I can't believe the story is meant to be a model of spiritual winners and materialist losers for eternity. It's a story about how to focus on the important stuff while working or sitting, praying or serving.

Wild speculation alert Maybe Mary gets a shout out for being bold enough to assume a role exclusively available to men. She gets a shout out from Jesus in choosing this more expansive part as learner and disciple. But be warned - that's my wild speculation.

Church

On a practical level, the church is desperate for more people to be servants like Martha as well as people of deep spirituality like Mary. You can't have one without the other, and both need to learn from each other. We are only winners if we work together.

Martha's growth (our growth) We need servants who support the mission of the church without getting lost in the weeds -- *Martha was distracted by her many tasks*. There is always such a thing as too much of a good thing. One can get addicted to being in a flurry of activity while losing the reason for being so busy. If you are grinding your teeth over the people who don't lift a finger, you don't have to grin and bear it. But at least think about why you do what you do. Holy work like sweeping, leaf blowing walkways, making coffee and moving tables is critical. While you are doing these things, pray that you are helping to create a space for God's transformation. Cleaning dishes, with the right mindset, is a doorway to heaven. That is the very best of the Martha way.

Mary's growth (our growth) If all of us are "grin and bear it" workers we can miss the deep well of renewal that God offers in other people. When someone is profoundly tuned into the love of God in their lives, it creates ripples that touches many. If you have sat next to someone in church who is completely plugged into worship or you work alongside someone who serves the poor with holy abandon, then you have been blessed by ripples. That is the best of the Mary way. On the shadow side, one can be so absorbed in personal development and spiritual inquiry that your life and your discoveries are the only meaningful things you see.

Funny (not funny) story - I had a free month in the summer right before my last year of seminary (2005). I dove hard into a prayerful life (before children!) Here was my daily routine:

- I meditated twice a day (40 minutes).
- Practiced 75 minutes of yoga.
- Lectio divina -- prayerful Bible reading (20 minutes).
- Journalled (30 minutes)
- I *had* to go to the darkroom to work on my large format photography twice a week.

I am embarrassed to tell you when Katrina hit in August, we had refugees coming in from New Orleans. I was annoyed that my fellow seminarians had "guilted" me into helping out at the Austin Convention Center.

I forgot service in favor of a narcissistic spiritual practice. I went off the deep end and forgot to open my eyes. I thought I had chosen the better part, but was annoyed with myself and others because this "prayer" did not make me happy, and certainly made me less effective when people were in real need.

In our journey together, let's not have spiritual winners and materialistic losers. Let's work and pray that the Kingdom of God becomes more real on earth as it is in heaven. This is interior and exterior work. For a moment - millennia ago - Mary tuned into the big picture -- God's mission has a church and it invites us into sacred work and sacred mystery.

Let's be a little more like Mary, Martha, and Frank Sinatra -- *do be do be do be do*. **Todd**