

16th Sunday 2013 Luke 10.38-42

As a preacher I constantly worry that I have nothing to say, or at least nothing interesting or insightful to say. It is part of my vanity that I don't want to say the same old thing that has been said a thousand times before. It is nice when I have some personal anecdote or movie scene. This will entertain and, alas, be remembered more than the scriptural insight it is meant to illuminate. That is valuing the horse instead of the cart. Most weeks I do, with much sweat and grief, get something on paper, knowing that a manuscript is inferior to simple spontaneous speaking. But if I'd try that, my mind would go blank, as it so often does.

This is one way I sin against Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: "be not anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will take care of itself. Consider the birds of the air and lilies of the field. If God provides for them, will he not much more do so for you?" I realize that Jesus was originally talking about food and clothing, necessities of life. To give a good homily is not a necessity to me; my physical needs are will be provided by my religious community no matter how I perform. It is not a necessity to you. Someone else will speak intelligently when I can't. The church has survived for two thousand years, with preaching that is mostly "uninteresting." Cleverness is not a necessity.

All this connects me more with Martha who worried, than with Mary who knew how to relax. But let's focus on Mary a bit. Is it coincidence that there are so many Mary's in the gospel? Or are we meant to mix them together a bit? Today's Mary is a little bit like Mary the mother of Jesus in her capacity for stillness and her receptivity. Today's Mary is a little bit like Mary Magdalene: not in the lurid past attributed to her by tradition but in a tendency to emotional extremes. Today's Mary later washes Jesus' feet with her tears, and is commended for this. Mary Magdalene is usually pictured clinging to the cross, wild with grief. This continues in her tears by the tomb where she recognizes Jesus when he calls her by name. Both women might be thought hysterical. But they have the advantage of profound intuition that only comes to those who go all the way. The mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany: you can distinguish their personalities, but also trace a strong thread of commonality. Each of them loved the Lord in a passionate way. They challenge our lukewarmness and mediocrity.

Mary of Bethany's domestic situation was highly unusual. She lived with her sister and brother; none of them married. Does this suggest a dysfunctional childhood, an inability to grow up? Economic necessity at the time demanded marriage; why did they stay together? Was Lazarus always sickly? Was he overly dependent on Martha, who was clearly head of the house? Was Mary the youngest, always indulged, and therefore self-centered, heedless of duty, slightly lazy?

In choosing Mary to talk to, Jesus shows his preference for the defective and pathetic, those who can't quite make it on their own. Those whom St Paul calls "the foolish." This is what makes true Christianity so exasperating to the strong and self-reliant.

What did Mary learn when she sat at Jesus' feet before dinner? She should have learned, "Get up and help your sister, so we can all sit down together, and enjoy the fellowship of a tranquil evening." We do not know what Jesus said, but presumably it was not small talk. We ourselves feel a certain indignation on Martha's behalf, a sympathy with her. We cannot understand why Jesus says that Mary chose the better part. It seems insensitive; it seems unfair.

All this takes the story too literally. It is meant to be symbolic of various conflicting internal tendencies. Martha represents the apostolic life, faith in action. Mary represents the quiet, inner, contemplative stance: the seemingly useless life of prayer. Christians, and other religions, honor such uselessness. They believe it to be the foundation for any worthwhile human pursuit. Each aspect needs the other. Contemplation without a concern for the world is self-indulgent; action without inner prayer becomes frenetic and hollow.

Deep inside we know that we want and need such integration, but we usually cannot achieve it, or articulate it. This can make us cynical, as Abraham's wife Sarah seems to have been, when she laughed at the possibility of giving birth in old age. Yet prayer, to be authentic, requires honesty before God. It requires our willingness to say what we feel. Thus, when Martha, hand on hip and sweating in her apron, "lets fly," she might be as prayerful as Mary sitting still. Her spontaneous outburst allows Jesus to speak to her; it makes her stop and listen.

If we can unpack the second reading (Colossians 1.26-28), we find a message similar to what Jesus taught Mary and Martha. But we must break it down and simplify. “You want to understand God’s message in its fullness?”—the author asks. “I assure you the mystery that is hidden *can be* revealed and experienced. The mystery is that Christ is in you, giving you a glorious future. So take this in, and you will become wise, complete, and mature as God intends you to be.”

When we slow down and stop complaining as Martha needs to do; when we notice and contribute as Mary needs to do; then we find completeness and maturity. We find spiritual health, as Lazarus did when he was brought back from the dead. We find in ourselves less worry, and more simplicity and trust. It becomes a little more natural to have the simplicity of the birds and lilies who do not have to worry.

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