

A Sermon preached on
July 18, 2010
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Knox United Church
Parksville, BC

'Martha, Martha you are worried....'

Holy One,
Be present in these moments as we contemplate this story.
Gather us as your people in relationship with you,
and with each other.

And may the words of my mouth, and the meditation of each of our hearts,
draw us into deeper union with you, O Holy presence. AMEN

An African proverb says:

*"Every morning a gazelle gets up knowing
it must outrun the fastest lion or it will be eaten.*

*And every morning a lion gets up knowing
it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death.*

*So whether you are a gazelle or a lion,
every morning when you get up you'd better be running."*

When I look around here this morning...
I do not see lions and gazelles,
I see human beings..

So, why do many of us live every day,
feeling like we are always running?

If we were to ask Jesus...
'Is it better to be Mary or Martha??
What would he answer????

This particular story, with Jesus commenting on the sister's behaviour,
is found only in Luke's Gospel.

We do however... meet Mary and Martha in John's Gospel
as sisters of Lazarus, living in the Bethany near Jerusalem. (11:1)

There are two separate stories in John's Gospel about Mary and Martha,
and the behaviour of the two sisters in both those stories,
corresponds to Luke's description of them.

In John chapter eleven:

After the death of Lazarus,
Martha goes out to meet Jesus, while Mary sits in the house (Jn 11:20);

In a later chapter Martha serves dinner,
and Mary is reported to pour ointment on the feet of Jesus. (Jn 12:1-3)

The Mary / Martha story in Luke, is a well-known story....
if it is new to you, perhaps you will have some insights
that you might share with the rest of us.

Whatever the case,
there is an element here, that is radical in its nature.

An element that is far-reaching and fundamental in its character,
when it comes to early middle-eastern culture.

Jesus is received into a woman's home....
In Luke, there is no mention of brother Lazarus.

Martha welcomed Jesus into her home,
and Jesus enters, and teaches two women.

Yes Mary is the one at his feet,
humble as a student would be....
but Martha is there as well.

There is no mention of Lazarus,
the supposed man of the house.

Martha welcomes Jesus into her home,
Jesus enters, and teaches two women.

Rabbis, did not allow women to 'sit at their feet'..
Rabbis did not allow women to sit at their feet as
disciples would ordinarily do.

Rabbis did not allow women to be disciples.

But Luke has no problem
with women being numbered among the disciples.

Jesus as we have seen many times before,
has no problem with women being his disciples.

Martha welcomes Jesus into her home.
Martha extended hospitality to Jesus,
Mary extended hospitality to Jesus.

It is easy to remember,
that Jesus tells Mary, that her hospitality is preferred....
or does he?

Manuscripts differ, and scholars still are unsure,
about the exact interpretation and details of the words of Jesus.

The New Revised Standard Version says:
'there is need of only one thing'

and traditionally we have recognized that Mary is doing the 'right' thing.

Yet others read:
'few things are needful'
and 'one thing is needed'

One interpretation has Jesus commenting on the number
of dishes that Martha has prepared.... simply too much food!

Over the years though,
we have made this text about a choice between:
preparing food and listening at the feet of Jesus -
the choice between doing and being.

Is it possible that here are two sisters
each offering hospitality to Jesus in their own way?

Is it possible that they are both in awe of this important guest,
and seek to honour him in different ways?

Luke, in this story refines the understanding of hospitality...
hospitality is all about the one who is the guest.

this is the 'one thing necessary'...

Martha is not properly attending to Jesus,
as her distraction of 'other things' gets in the way.

It is not that she is busy...
it is not that she is 'not sitting' like Mary chose to do...

but rather the state of her mind and heart is distracted...
she is anxious... self pre-occupied...

But, Martha is not properly attending to Jesus,
as her distraction of 'other things' gets in the way.

Any one of you who have committed your time and energy
to working in the kitchen here,

know it **is** possible to prepare food, serve, set and clear tables,
and still be very aware of your focus on others and hospitality...

Martha was busy but not paying attention to what mattered,
she forgot why she was busy.... and forgot who her work was for.

Hospitality is about the guest...
not, the menu.

I imagine if Mary had of been day dreaming,
looking out the window and not listening to the teachings of Jesus,

I imagine if she would have been chastised
for her lack of proper hospitality.

Both are good hostesses...
until Martha becomes distracted by 'the doing',
and forgets to attend to the teachings of Jesus,
while she prepares and serves the meal.

Both are good hostesses,
until Martha, becomes resentful of her sisters
way of offering hospitality.

This is not an either / or story.
It is about our focus - on the presence of God amongst us.

It is a reminder that action and contemplation,
are both necessary.

One way is not better,
--- a balanced life has both.

As we gather around the Table,
we enter into the story of Martha and Mary.

Hospitality is our way of being, when we gather together,
inviting each other into communion and connection.

The work has been done to prepare this feast,
bread prepared, juice prepared.

Those who did the preparation did so
with hospitality in their hearts.

And now as we gather,
we must come with open, hospitable hearts as well.

We must behave in such a way ,
that friend and stranger will feel welcome.

All are invited and our welcome is for all...
all ages, all stages of faith and familiarity with our tradition,
those who are certain and the questioning are welcome.

all genders, all sexual orientations,
people of all colours and races are welcome.

All levels of health and mobility are welcome.

We behave in such a way ,
that friend and stranger will feel welcome.

Jesus is here, host of this feast...
but let's not just look busy....

let us focus our preparation,
so our hearts are open.

let us listen to the teachings he brings,
as we gather and partake of this feast, as we rest in the mystery of this feast.

May we take the time to wait upon God,
and let the Spirit inform our action and contemplation.

Jesus is among us so let us welcome him
guest and as host.

And welcome each other,
as we gather in unity.

If we were to ask Jesus...
'Is it better to be Mary or Martha??

He would no doubt answer

YES!

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