

July 17, 2022
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11, Year C
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Amos 8:1-12
Psalm 52
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

The gospel story of Mary and Martha is one that that we relate to. A ready container for our own cultural stereotypes and our own personal experiences, it feels so familiar. On the stereotype side, we see a silly catfight between grown women, with one sister tattling on the other to a substitute “daddy.” On the experience side, we just know that Martha is the older sibling, and that her exasperation with Mary’s behavior is based on more than the events of one day. We understand the envy, exhaustion, and jealousy at the heart of Martha’s understandably justifiable if unbecomingly petulant complaint against Mary.

Then again, speaking of relatable familiarity, it’s possible that what I just said has more to do with me than it does with the gospel. Therefore let me ask: are you a Mary or a Martha? Perhaps you’ve heard that question before. In that particular forced binary, I confess to being a Martha, though I have long aspired to being a Mary. The key word in that sentence is *aspired*, because in my endeavors to migrate from one to the other I have achieved only marginal success. This begs a couple of additional questions. Is one’s position firmly innate? Or is the culture of preoccupation that we occupy nearly impossible to overcome? In this, it’s perhaps worth noting that the “self-care industry” in this country is worth billions and billions of dollars. It certainly doesn’t help that, in our odd historical moment, there is so much we need to *do*.

At the end of this gospel story, Jesus gives the unexpected response that we have come to expect: he famously renounces the distracted Martha and affirms the attentive Mary. I think he’s saying out loud what we’ve always known deep down. On one hand, it’s exactly what we want to hear. It’s a relief to get affirmation for our yearning endeavors to do what it takes to reorder our priorities. On the other hand, it doesn’t necessarily feel great. I hear Jesus’ words and I feel convicted. I have heard these words before, many times. I have even tried to act on them, and still I miss too much. I feel like I have failed.

We might take a breath here. Remember, the point of the gospel is never to make us feel bad. Besides, this story’s relatable familiarity might not be the most important thing about it. There is actually a lot more going on than we can gather on the surface. To tap into the full radical power of this story, we need to dip deeper. Instead of its relatable familiarity to us today, we might notice what made it stand out in its day.

First, notice that this story is from Luke, and it is contained only in Luke. Remember, Luke’s gospel has a particular agenda. That agenda, voiced succinctly and beautifully by another Mary in the poetry of the Magnificat, is nothing short of a complete overturning of society.

Second, notice where this story occurs in Luke's gospel. The story just before this one is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus offers that up in reply to a legal expert's inquiry about how to inherit eternal life, and the question of who is his neighbor. In that parable, it's the Samaritan, the unexpected one, the outsider, who is the good neighbor. This story is meant to be read in the light of that parable.

Third, notice the societal norms that provide the context for this story. Women and men lived very separated lives. Women would be responsible for hospitality, and hospitality only. Mary is specifically described as sitting and listening at the feet of the Jesus. This is the position of a *disciple*. It is a position that no woman in her culture would occupy.

With all of that, it seems that the difference between Mary and Martha isn't really distraction versus attentiveness. Instead, it's boundaries, specifically boundaries around gender. Martha heeds the boundaries and even unsuccessfully solicits Jesus' help enforcing them. Mary transgresses the boundaries, with Jesus' assent and encouragement.

I can imagine that most of us probably do spend too much physical, spiritual, and emotional energy on the wrong things. But maybe thinking differently about this story helps us to think differently about all that. And maybe that different perspective can give us at least a little of the relief we have been seeking. I know it brings up very different questions for me. For example: What does it mean to be a person who transgresses boundaries? A community that transgresses boundaries? A Christianity that transgresses boundaries? That's what I'm interested in. And you know what else? I have been that kind of Mary, and it's the kind of Mary I want to creatively continue to be. I say that about me, but I'm also saying that about all of you as well.

There are a whole lot of directions I could go in this sermon from there. I could discuss things I did on my just-concluded sabbatical that by happenstance are very much related to this. Most importantly, I would talk about listening and discernment, and discernment as both contemplation and action. I could mention a truly wonderful book I'm almost finished with, *This Here Flesh* by Cole Arthur Riley, who is also creator and writer of the also wonderful social media feed "Black Liturgies." I could pick out one of the distressing items that turned up in the news over the last month while I was away and that I was honestly relieved not to need to preach about. But for now, I'm going to leave those things right there and ask you to ponder for yourself the idea of transgressing boundaries in order to be a disciple of Jesus. And I'll continue this sermon by connecting all this to our place as part of a larger body of Christians.

The 80th General Convention of the Episcopal Church concluded on Monday. If you're new to the Episcopal Church, you might have no idea what that sentence means, so I'll offer a brief explanation. As one resource describes it, the General Convention is:

The national legislative body of the Episcopal Church. It consists of a House of Bishops, which includes all active and retired bishops, and a House of Deputies, which includes four lay persons and four clergy from each diocese, each area mission, and the Convocation of the American Churches in Europe. The Convention meets every three years. The Houses meet and act separately, and both must concur to adopt legislation. The General Convention alone has authority to amend the Prayer Book and the church's Constitution, to amend the canons (laws) of the church, and to determine the program and budget of the General Convention, including the missionary, educational, and social programs it authorizes.¹

In short, it is the Episcopal Church's primary governing body. This just-concluded convention took place in person in Baltimore. Due to a yearlong pandemic delay, the previous convention was four years ago, and the next one will be in two years. Also due to the pandemic, the convention was shortened by half to four days and attendance was strictly limited. Despite the challenges, important work was done.

Let me say here that one of the reasons I love the Episcopal Church is the General Convention. You see, we don't have a pope who wields top-down authority. Instead we have a legislative body—a representative legislature—via which regular folks like you and I can mobilize grassroots support and effect important change. It can take a while, but sometimes those changes involve significant and important boundary transgression. In that, this General Convention, shortened though it was, was a great one. I want to make sure you know about some of the key things that happened.

First, let's talk about church leadership. The House of Deputies elected Julia Ayala Harris as its new president and the Rev. Rachel Taber-Hamilton as its new vice president. This will be the first time that both positions have been filled at the same time by women. Ayala Harris is Latina and Taber-Hamilton is Indigenous, marking firsts for their positions. Continuing Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is of course a Black man. The three top leaders of our church are now people of color.

Now, let's turn to resolutions. Among the resolutions passed by this General Convention² were the following:

- Several important resolutions on race, including funding work on environmental racism and truth-telling about the Episcopal Church's history with Indigenous boarding schools.
- A resolution "affirming that all Episcopalians should be able to access abortion services and birth control with no restriction on movement, autonomy, type, or timing." This reiterates the Episcopal Church's longstanding position on abortion.
- A resolution that will begin the process that will eventually allow supplemental rites, such as the expansive language and same-sex marriage liturgies, to finally attain Prayer Book status.

- A resolution directing the church to establish a staff position of Director of LGBTQI and Women’s Ministries.
- Several additional resolutions related to the full inclusion of LGBTQ people. The General Convention directed church leadership to appoint a Task Force on LGBTQ+ Inclusion; affirmed the inclusion of non-binary people; directed the Church to develop resources for welcoming and supporting people of all genders; called for gender and sexuality training throughout the Church; supported refugee asylum for those persecuted for LGBTQ+ status; and called on the Church to advocate for gender affirming care for those of all ages. I want to add here that, after decades of often acrimonious debate about LGBTQ issues, these resolutions were passed via the consent calendar—that is, with no debate.

If you have any doubt about the importance of the social witness of the Episcopal Church, I’ll refer you to today’s reading from Amos. I could have preached about twenty sermons just from that. But I really wanted to stick with about Mary and Martha today, so I’ll leave you to delve into that on your own.

And I’ll say that the things that came out of General Convention give us a potent reminder that ours is a Church that we can be excited to be a part of. I admit that none of this happened overnight, some of it was woefully delayed, and some of it still requires us to do some hard work. And yet, here we are. The thing is, a lot of boundary transgressors took their places at the feet of our savior, and then they fought to make it easier for others to do the same. While there is so much in the world to be concerned and discouraged about, let’s take a moment for celebration and gratitude. Remember, you too have transgressed boundaries to sit at the feet of our savior, and not just for your sake, but for the sake of a suffering world. So take heart. The kingdom of God has drawn near.

Notes

¹ “General Convention,” *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User Friendly Reference for Episcopalians*, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, eds., available at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/general-convention/> (accessed July 17, 2022).

² For an excellent summary of major events, see Mary Frances Schjonberg, “80th General Convention wrap-up: shortened, masked, tested, legislated,” *Episcopal News Service*, July 12, 2022, available at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2022/07/12/80th-general-convention-wrap-up-shortened-masked-tested-legislated/> (accessed July 17, 2022). For an excellent summary of legislation related to LGBTQ people, see Susan Russell, “Sitting for a minute as the dust settles from the 80th General Convention of the Episcopal Church,” a post from her blog, *An Inch At A Time: Reflections on the Journey*, July 12, 2022, available at <http://inchatatime.blogspot.com/2022/07/sitting-for-minute-as-dust-settles-from.html> (accessed July 17, 2022).