

Winners and Losers

Amos 8: 1-12; Colossians 1: 15-28; Luke 10: 38-42
Proper 11C St Thomas's Church 2016

Since we're in the (long) season of polling

I'm going to take an informal, unscientific opinion poll here:

which sister in this parable is the older sister: Martha or Mary?

How many think Martha? Mary?

What makes you think so? How do you know?

I know it's Martha because I am an older sister myself,

the responsible one, the one of whom much was expected,

brought up to be a do-er, carefully taught how and what to do.

I was taught well not only WHAT to do but how to do it RIGHT...

because in my world there was right way and wrong way to do anything.

I was expected to be the model for my younger brother

who was much more laid back – and allowed to get away with much more –

than I was. I'd have the chores. He got to sit around and read.

I'd get scolded if I didn't do things right. He got hugs for being a good reader.

I don't blame Martha for being cranky! I know an older sister when I see one!

Or do I? Here's the thing about the parable of Martha and Mary – it invites this kind of stereotyping, judging and evaluating people according to their gender, their age, what they do and their prowess at it. Like me, you may have ideas about these sisters and their age and station – but the story actually tells us nothing.

All we know is that Martha wants Jesus to give Mary a virtual kick in the butt and get her out into the kitchen to help.

The task at hand is hospitality and Martha is aggrieved that she has to do all the heavy lifting herself.

Doubtless she'd like to be the one sitting at Jesus' feet just listening to the conversation.

Why should Mary get the soft job – if that's what it is - while she, Martha, works so hard?

Endless Bible studies, especially women's Bible studies, have debated Martha and Mary and their roles in this story.

In our context, women generally locate themselves in Martha's slot when asked where they find themselves in the story.

Surprisingly, it can take often take extensive discussion to get to the "both are needed" place.

Especially when we find ourselves "entertaining angels (or others) unawares,"

women in our culture are conditioned to be the busy bees in the kitchen,
putting on the perfect, beautiful, effortless-looking Martha (as in Stewart) meal.
If that's the goal, it's no surprise that the biblical Martha wanted help.

The problem comes, not in Martha's wanting help,
but when we start making assumptions and comparisons:
which sister and her actions is better or worse?

Who is the "right" one here, who is "wrong"?

And why do we jump right in to comparing?

Such comparing leads straight down the road to COMPETITION
a contest where someone wins and the other is inevitably a loser.

Comparisons rarely end in the acceptance of the other –
which is why my theologian husband has always said
there should be an 11th commandment:
thou shalt never compare thyself to another.

Let's think about it for a minute:

in the life of discipleship, is one life of service or vocation better than any other
more "right" than any other?

Is it better to be a brother at the Society for St John the Evangelist

more than / better than being an activist, leading the Black Lives Matter movement?

Is a clergyperson more than / better than a professor?

Is Martha more than / better than Mary? Or Mary more than / better than Martha?

Would Jesus say that Martha's active service is all that matters?

Would he choose Mary's quiet listening and learning and discount service?

As far as I can see, this parable is not about what form of service is better than the other, Martha's or Mary's.

Surely active service and quiet prayer and learning from Jesus are both necessary – and in a life of discipleship following Jesus, both need to be visible in the way one leads one's life, not like an ornament, a shiny piece of jewelry worn around the neck easily removable - and disposable...

but more like a tattoo indelibly inked into the skin, there for life for all to see.

This parable, isn't a problem to be solved or judging which sister has it right...who wins, who loses.

No, it turns OUR ideas on their head....because with God there ARE no winners and losers.

All are made in God's image, created good and dearly loved.

But we constantly put ourselves in the God slot ignoring Jesus' call to judge not.

Our society fosters passing judgment on others in both men and women
and it starts early.

In my formative years, the list of losers was long:

Jews / Roman Catholics / blacks / gays ... just to name a few.

My parents and teachers "knew" – they'd been taught to hate and fear
and they taught their children well.

Following in the footsteps of centuries of my white privileged forbears
I too drank the poison Kool Aid.

Then came Church and the Parable Challenge.

Jesus came along and began calling all these judgments into question.

What difference does Jesus make? All the difference.

In any Bible story you can think of,

did Jesus ever say that ANYONE was better than any other?

Did Jesus ever exclude anyone, refuse to sit an talk with anyone?

Did he ever say that ANYONE was not qualified to serve, to be a disciple?

Did he ever define discipleship as either active service OR sitting and learning?

Serving food and a hospitable welcome OR prayer and study?

Jesus only defined discipleship as loving God and our neighbor.

It's not Jesus – it's you and I and the systems of which we are a part
who determine that there are some who exist OUTSIDE of God's grace.

What if this parable is not at all about who is better
but about WHO MATTERS.

What if one of the challenges implicit in this story
is the challenge to step away from judging what others do
and seeing who they are in the eyes of God in Jesus Christ?

There is a FB cartoon circulating just now which shows 7 white skeletons
against a black background. Underneath each one is a label:
black / white / gay / straight / religious / atheist / pirate.

The pirate as half of one leg missing – otherwise the skeletons are identical.

When you look at us that way, we are all alike in so many ways.

We live and we die – our opinions go with us.

And yet if you were brought up as I was,
somewhere deep inside you, you learned, you know
there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to do things.

Even worse you probably learned there are right and wrong people.

That right / wrong division is currently being furiously stoked
by one of our candidates for President of this country.

But even as we are still stinging from the deaths of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile
and 5 police officers in Dallas, (not to mention the turmoil in France and Turkey)
we have to ask ourselves

is any one of those dead men “less than” any other?

Is any one of them more “right” than any other?

Or in our country, do we bear the guilt for sitting in the God seat,
judging others, creating personal and systemic divisions
and letting those divisions – which have separated us for generations -
fester and ooze their poison?

As a society we have elevated some
and walked all over others we have deemed unworthy
from the earliest days of our country.

The successful have ignored the cries of those who struggle and suffer
and can't make ends meet, calling them lazy and sluggards.

Those with health care have chosen not to see the wounded ones
left by the side of the road. We tell ourselves “that's just the way it is.”

That's just the way it is. Really? And if it is, or rather because it is,
we must be acting Marthas helping in the kitchen to take out the trash
with the Black Lives Matter movement, for example.

Listening Mary has to lead to acting Martha. Faith without works is dead.

But acting Martha has to be renewed and strengthened by Listening Mary.

We need to be – and do - both

The story of Mary and Martha cannot be about better and worse,
about whose actions matter more or less than others.

After all we are all better and worse, inseparably wheat and weeds,
saints and sinners.

By trapping us into judging which sister is doing the better thing

it calls us out in our sinfully competitive ways

pitting Martha against Mary

me against you, white against black, straight against gay, rich against poor.

As Christians, we cannot let ourselves passively participate in a culture

that seems to believe that all are not equal – not when we believe

that we are all created in the image of God,

revealed to us in Jesus Christ as Colossians reminds us.

We are called by him to the way of love,
to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, & care for the sick,
not to build walls that separate, talk trash, or deny basic safety and respect for all people.

This parable invites us to rethink a lot of things we may have taken for granted
as parables are wont to do.

It is not about whose service is better, and is there a right way and a wrong way.

This is about how I can do my work AND learn from you and our differences...

it is not about my needing to be right or better

but recognizing that when we do it together, $2 + 2 = 5$.

Even more than that, it is about finding Jesus and walking with him.

Nadia Boltz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor who ministers

to those who are uncomfortable with church

to bikers and to many who would be considered by the elites to be trash,

reminds us that anytime we draw a line between us and someone else

Jesus is over there. On the other side of the line,

with whoever we just moved away from.

Jesus reminds us we need one another.

In the words of the children's song: I need you, you need me,
if we're to ever be a happy family...
with a knick knack, paddy whack, give a dog a bone,
Jesus is calling, may God's will be done. Amen.