

**8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Sunday, July 18, 2010**

**GOSPEL: Luke 10:38-42**

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 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." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

38 Ἐν δὲ τῷ πορεύεσθαι αὐτοὺς αὐτὸς εἰσῆλθεν εἰς κώμην τινά· γυνὴ δὲ τις ὀνόματι Μάρθα ὑπεδέξατο αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν. 39 καὶ τῆδε ἦν ἀδελφὴ καλουμένη Μαριάμ, [ἡ] καὶ παρακαθεσθεῖσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας τοῦ κυρίου ἤκουεν τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ. 40 ἡ δὲ Μάρθα περιεσπᾶτο περὶ πολλὴν διακονίαν· ἐπιστᾶσα δὲ εἶπεν· κύριε, οὐ μέλει σοι ὅτι ἡ ἀδελφὴ μου μόνην με κατέλειπεν διακονεῖν; εἶπον οὖν αὐτῇ ἵνα μοι συναντιλάβηται. 41 ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῇ ὁ κύριος· Μάρθα Μάρθα, μεριμνᾷς καὶ θορυβάζῃ περὶ πολλά, 42 ὀλίγων δὲ ἐστὶν χρεῖα ἡ ἐνός· Μαριάμ γὰρ τὴν ἀγαθὴν μερίδα ἐξελέξατο ἣτις οὐκ ἀφαιρεθήσεται αὐτῆς.

*¿Where are You in the Story of Mary and Martha?*

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God who is the Creator, the Redeemer and the One who Sustains us and nourishes us with love and hope. **Amen.**

If you search on the Internet long and hard enough, you can actually find some Mary and Martha jokes, or shall we say, humorous comparisons of the two personalities which sprang forth from just 5 verses in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Story of the Life of Jesus of Nazareth* by the Gospel-Writer we call Luke.

Those 5 verses from the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century have given grist to the mill of sermons in every Century since they came into the public domain of preachers (all male of course) who used those verses, and the two women within those verses, to make various points before a congregation ... usually pointing out the pious virtue of one of the women in the story (Mary) ... and the total lack of understanding of the other woman in the story (Martha).

I don't believe for one moment this is the point of the story at all ... in fact it does great injustice to the story ... but we will get to that in a moment. First, a little humor ... the Mary and Martha Jokes, or as they are found on the quite interesting web site *Sensible House Cleaning Solutions*, "Martha's Way and Mary's Way."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This came from a delightful web page in a website entitled "Sensible House Cleaning Solutions"; <http://www.sensible-house-cleaning-solutions.com/cleaning-jokes.html>

#1

Martha's way: Stuff a miniature marshmallow in the bottom of a sugar cone to prevent ice cream drips. ??

Mary's way: Just suck the ice cream out of the bottom of the cone.

#2

Martha's way: Use a meat-baster to "squeeze" your pancake batter onto the hot griddle and you'll get perfectly shaped pancakes every time. ??

Mary's way: Buy the precooked kind you nuke in the microwave for 30 seconds.

#4

Martha's way: To prevent eggshells from cracking, add a pinch of salt to the water before hard-boiling. ??

Mary's way: Who cares if they crack, aren't you going to take the shells off anyway?

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Well that's the kind of stuff that religious thinking can turn into rather than talking about a home into which Jesus is invited, with an act of hospitality, which, while being full of happiness is nothing to joke about ... two friends of Jesus, one sitting devotedly and listening to him teach ... the other being the attentive worker seeing that Jesus is indeed welcome. But ...

But, what do we have here? Sisterhood? Sibling rivalry? And what kind of remark is that in the story from Jesus ... the ... *guest* ... as he turns and chides the one sister!?

It's what psychiatrists call *triangulation* ... Jesus – according to the story – chooses the side of Mary ... and, if we think this story through ... what kind of model for ministry, indeed for daily living is that?

The answer is, It's not! Not if this story is just about two different kinds of personalities, one better than the other which leads to the categorization of people ... which, in the church means mostly, putting people "in their place." But putting people in their place is never the point of the Gospel Story, unless it is where Jesus attacks those who have the power to put people in their place (super-zealous religious leaders, occupying armies of a foreign country, political appointees who care not one whit for the needs of the poor ... and so on). A careful reading of the Gospel Story will reveal that as an antidote to such malicious behaviour ... Jesus does indeed insist on putting those whom the world ignores and neglects in *their* place, their *rightful* place, which would be in the care and loving of God through the compassionate actions of a neighbor (remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan two weeks ago? ... and just verses before this story of Mary and Martha in the 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Luke?).

So in spite of the fact that as a woman you may have belonged to some kind of Martha Circle in another parish and wished you could belong to a Mary Circle ... or heard from the church based upon this story that you should indeed stay in your place (I've even seen where this text has been and is used to speak against the Ordination of women as Pastors or Priests) ... or (whichever gender you may) hear this story only as one which places two sisters against each other ... any of that is to walk so far *around* the story that we may as well go back to the jokes.

So here are two more:

#5

Martha's way: To easily remove burnt-on food from your skillet, simply add a drop or two of dish soap and enough water to cover the bottom of pan, and bring it to a boil on the stovetop.??

Mary's way: Eat out every night and avoid cooking.

#6

Martha's way: Spray your Tupperware with nonstick cooking spray before pouring in tomato based sauces and there won't be any stains.'

Mary's way: Feed your garbage disposal and there won't be any leftovers.

The jokes are funny ... sort of ... but you see what happens ... we get lost in them and so avoid the Story as *Story* ... and when we lose the Story as Story, we lose the Gospel.

The whole point of a biblical Story or of a Jesus Parable or reading one of the Psalms or even (shudder) reading one of those long paragraphs written by Paul of Tarsus ... the whole point is to have us ask the question, "Where Am *I* in the Story, the Parable, the Psalm, the Letter of Paul to the Colossians?"

Let's look at the choices.

In the 5 verses from Luke's Gospel, this story is not about personality *types* but about something else ... namely *hospitality* and what Luke calls "the Kingdom of God come Near" ... in those 5 verses of hospitality the question is now: where might you find yourself?

Two possibilities that come to our attention immediately are:

1. Mary
2. Martha

If you see yourself as Mary, what might that mean?

Well, it might mean that you find yourself engaged in life so much so that you need, want, require, yearn for the depth of its meaning ... and nothing will distract you from going for that. Yes, things may build up around you, even pull at you, even throw themselves down in front of you ... and yet, what you want, what you need is to listen, to learn, to acquire, to soak up ... what? ... truth ... hope ... love ... compassion ... caring ... peace ... joy ... understanding.

Ok, but what if you see yourself as Martha? Then the jokes start, don't they? You're a busybody, you're pre-occupied, you're always fretting about, you're what we called in Seminary "the Worrier of the Cup" ... but if that's where you're headed right now in this Story ... STOP IMMEDIATELY and re-read the 1<sup>st</sup> verse.

"Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home." (Luke 10.38)

There's so much in that first verse ... and it's nearly always overlooked.

Let's read it again slowly and carefully ...

"Now," writes Luke the Storyteller, "as they" ... *they* who? Well, from what comes before, we know it is Jesus and his followers ... we assume Jesus and his *disciples* (the small group) but it could be more ... but let's say simply "Jesus and his followers" to be safe ...

[go on]

"he" ... i.e. Jesus ... "entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home."

Now there's the part I guarantee nearly everyone misses. Here in Luke's recounting of the Gospel Story, it is *Martha's* home, and *Martha* does the inviting ... not the home of Mary and Martha (although tradition has made it so, especially since those two women appear in other places in the New Testament, namely in the Gospel of John, and in that story, Lazarus, you will recall ... the brother of Mary and Martha is present as well) ... but *here* in this story, it's *Martha's* home ... and what takes place is something Luke the Gospel Writer always puts before us ... the unusual, the unexpected, the turn of events, the heretofore un-thought of ... *think Middle Eastern custom, culture, way of doing things* ... picture a woman, head covered with a scarf, maybe even a veil, walking *out* of her dwelling into the street and not only confronting a man, not only speaking to him, but inviting him into her home. How does this look?

Can you hear the neighbors?

“What kind of woman is she? What does she think she is doing?”

But that's part of the whole Gospel Story ... in the kingdom of God which Jesus comes to announce, things are turned around, upside down, rough places are smoothed, paths are leveled, and there is equality ... for everyone.

So, not elsewhere in the Gospels, but here it is Martha's home, she invites and welcomes, she opens the door, she sets the table, and look ... she has even invited her own sister, Mary.

Is there anyone else in the story to whom you might find yourself attached?

Well, Jesus of course. If you see yourself as Jesus, that's interesting (!) ... but not beyond propriety ... if you see yourself as Jesus, sitting and teaching, sharing and offering, speaking and engaging ... maybe it is that you find yourself so caught up in the Good News, so occupied with the reign of God as it should be that even a remark that seeks to brush aside someone who interrupts the reign of God with a preoccupation, a distraction ... even such a remark can be understood as knowing how much more important peace, love, compassion, inclusiveness, welcoming, and the like are ... than whether the tea is hot and the scones are arranged alphabetically on Aunt Bessie's China ...

But is there anyone else in the story? ... other roles in which you might find yourself?

Look deeply inside the text ... peer into the shadows ... close your eyes and listen to the sounds that come from the reading ...

There are many others there ... and maybe you find yourself sitting alongside them ... aligning yourself with them ...

Martha and Mary's parents? ... are they hidden in the shadows, looking on with great pride as the Teacher has chosen to speak to their daughters, share the meaning of the Torah with them, talk with their daughters about God's world, God's love, God's compassion?

Who else?

Disciples, maybe? Listening from the doorway or by the open window (remember this is 1<sup>st</sup> Century Galilee and Judea ... no double-pane insulated windows) ...

Peter, tapping his foot, wanting to go for some lentil soup himself, but fearing that if he does Peter and James and John will get to hear something he won't ... might Peter be there? Perchance you find yourself as Peter in life ... emboldened by the Story, yet too brusque in the way you want to get it across.

Maybe a Roman soldier or two standing just around the corner? Keeping an eye on things, making sure this Gospel-Freedom-Liberation-Theology Business doesn't go too far ... Don't want too many lawbreakers, too many people who cross boundaries, going where they shouldn't, being invited into homes and such ... If you see yourself as a Roman soldier in this story, you and I should have coffee this week and talk that over ...

Maybe you see the next-door neighbor? ... curious since Martha has been telling you about this man Jeshua Emmanuel, as she calls him ... and you want to hear more, you want to know if maybe he has a teaching which can help you, heal you, make the brokenness in your soul find a way back toward wholeness and Shalom ...

Well, there are many characters in the Gospel Stories for us to sit next to ... and we should always think about biblical accounts that way, for the Story is a living Story, and when we find ourselves in it, it lives in us, it catches us, holds us, and heals us, and compels us to become the life of faith itself, opening and welcoming and embracing, and that all people, everyone, has a place in the story, around the table, at the feet, bringing food, sharing hospitality, living the kingdom.

I want to leave you with a poem by Katha Pollitt, entitled "Martha" that comes from her book, *the mind-body problem*, and takes us on a journey from the middle of her home where she welcomed Jesus ... to the place where evil tried to crucify hospitality itself ... and beyond. Copies of the poem are available in the Chapel after the Service.

*Martha*<sup>2</sup>

Well, did he think the food would cook itself?  
Naturally, he preferred the sexy one,  
the one who leaned forward with velvet eyes and asked

clever questions that showed she'd done the reading.  
You'll notice he didn't summon up a picnic  
so that I could put up my feet and hear how lilies

do nothing but shine in God's light. God's  
movie star, he says  
we stand in glory, we are loved like sparrows,

like grains of sand: there are so many of us!  
He means he stands, he is loved.  
The music wells up in the dark theatre:

a kiss, a kill, a tumult of clouds and cymbals!  
We lift our hands, we weep, we don't deserve him.  
I don't desert him. I'm

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<sup>2</sup> by Katha Pollitt in *"the mind-body problem: poems"* Random House/New York 2009

all wrong, I'm nothing, hurrying home  
in my raincoat and practical shoes.  
The sky won't speak to me. But still,

somebody's got to care about the tablecloth  
and the bread, and the wine.

*Deo Gratias (+)*  
*The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III*  
*Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church*  
*Santa Fe, NM*