

RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 18, 2010

The Best Choice

Luke 10: 38-42

Mary? Martha? How do you feel about these two women and their story?

We all have a sense of 'Mary and Martha'. Some psychologists use their characters to exemplify personality types: Martha, Type A: active, outgoing, practical, workaholic, given to "Doing". Mary: Type B, thoughtful, takes time to smell the roses, impractical by contemporary standards, romantic, visionary, given to "Being".

On a balmy summer evening, Martha and Mary host a barbecue for friends who have dropped in while travelling. It's a special evening because Jesus is there, but, for Martha, at least, it is also frantic. She bustles about, baking bread, marinating salads, readying fish for the coals, arranging a bowl of summer fruit. Lamps to light; and bowls of aromatic water to set out for dusty feet: so many details to which attention must be paid! No wonder she seems distracted.

The intimate, human story of Mary and Martha is often in my heart as I live my life, called to sit at the feet of Jesus, but obliged by the busyness and compelling needs of life today, to take on Martha's "many tasks". Sometimes my son, Rae, asks if I can't just sit down and pay attention to a lovely piece of music – even puts choice pieces on my i-phone! Daughter Danielle, in England, wonders why I haven't yet looked at that great video of my grandson, Zachary, taking his first steps on You-Tube. (She knew exactly when I did see it! It was a broken computer that intervened - but isn't the world making us more like Martha every day?) When lists of things yet to do preoccupy me even as i-tunes croon in my ear, I wonder: would I have been able to put aside my concern for checking and serving to sit at Jesus' feet if he had come to dinner at my home? Or would I, like Martha, have found myself 'distracted by many tasks'?

My heart goes out to Martha. We're sisters, cut from the same fabric: fretting and fussing about many things. Like Martha, I cook too much food and worry about dust-devils, while trying to get through that 'List'! Sometimes I'm irritated by those who seem less distracted by the work around them. Martha in her frustration is kin to me. Is she to you?

Mary and Martha lived, John tells us, with their brother, Lazarus, in Bethany. John writes: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus". Luke tells us that when Martha invited Jesus to their home, Mary sat at his feet, absorbed in his teaching, while Martha, overwhelmed, complained to Jesus, that Mary had left her all the work.

In response, Martha heard a gentle rebuke stinging through the ages: "Martha,

Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only ONE thing."

Jesus had come in from the hot, dusty roads of Palestine, on his way to Jerusalem, and ultimately the cross. His friends' home was a natural resting place. Weary, both revered and plotted against, he must have wanted peace, a chance to share quiet words with those who loved him.

And here was Martha, graciously, with the best will in the world, organizing an elaborate meal. NO. "Only one thing is necessary," Jesus says. That may mean, "No fancy food - just bread and cheese; put aside time for me." We 'Martha's' find it hard to let go of our plans, to think about the only thing necessary for the other. Jesus loved Martha; gospel writers are clear about that. And Martha loved Jesus. But Martha had to be hospitable in her way and so ended up being inhospitable to the one who came to change her life.

Hospitality was divinely sanctioned in biblical times. God's hospitality is an essential part of Jesus' message, inviting us to a table at which he is the gracious host, serving us, by offering the bread of life. If Martha chooses hospitality in keeping with such a tradition, what can be wrong with her choice?

But Jesus asks us to think about genuine hospitality not as service but as openness to another. Choosing hospitality in this sense means choosing connectedness rather than busyness.

And Mary did. With courage, Mary sat at Jesus' feet, taking the traditional position of a disciple of a Jewish rabbi. Although Jewish law did not altogether prohibit women from studying Torah - law and scripture - nonetheless, it was unusual for a rabbi to instruct a woman. One first-century saying suggests the prevailing attitude: "Better to burn the Torah than teach it to a woman." Mary's action must have caused a stir.

However, Jesus affirms Mary's risky breaking of tradition. "Mary has chosen the better part." Jesus drew all people - women, children, lepers, Roman soldiers - out of their oppressed OR oppressing state, inviting them into fuller humanity and new life. "It will not be taken away from her."

Yet, it has been taken from her. In our world, Martha's is still the image of the ideal woman - or man. Women are still told: be a Martha: consumer, decorator, gourmet cook, loving mother, as well as active fund-raiser, volunteer, competent professional. When Martha hears that Mary has chosen what is necessary, she may feel angry and trapped. After all, even if she prefers being Mary she still has to do all Martha's jobs.

But the story of Mary and Martha provides a model for wholeness. In Mary, we find a new image for women's living, the intimations of a paradigm shift whose dimensions

we are still integrating into our living, as women look at the Bible from their perspective at Mary's side, at Jesus' feet. That shift has taken two-thousand plus years. It began on the roads of Palestine, in a home in Bethany, outside an empty tomb. And it began with Martha as well as Mary. In John's gospel, it is Martha, not Mary, who utters the remarkable insight: "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who is coming into the world..." Martha moves from frustration into wisdom. She knows who Jesus is. That is the beginning of new life.

Perhaps Mary, choosing hospitality of a different kind from her sister's, knew not only Jesus' but her own need so intensely that she could not do otherwise, only listen and learn, hungry for bread, thirsty for a drink Martha had not yet let herself imagine.

Both Martha and Mary are our sisters. We too, in the midst of the distractions of our living, are hungry and thirsty for the living water and the bread of life. Barbecues and computers, salads and striving are not enough. Choosing hospitality in Mary's sense means choosing not only to love our neighbour and our guest, but to love God and ourselves, by listening to our hearts.

Luke has a way of pairing stories for added insight. Luke places the story of Mary and Martha just after that of the Good Samaritan. There Jesus' concluding words "Go and do as he did" seem to call us to attend to another's needs and desires, to love our neighbour. Yet when he comes to Bethany, Jesus tells Martha that her sister's quiet listening is a better choice than her distracted serving. Jesus gives us an unforgettable illustration of loving a neighbour and then shows us what must take place first: if we are to be able to hear our neighbour's cry. He shows us - and Martha - what it means to love ourselves, that we may then more fully love God and neighbour. Remarkably, he does so through a woman who chooses to sit at his feet.

Mary and Martha's story tells us there are two interlocking sides to a life of faith: we need to get out of the kitchen, the office, even the Food Bank for a while. We need to connect ourselves with the source of all life. Then there will be energy and vision for healing the sick, working for justice, caring for the earth, serving at a community meal - and even preparing a barbecue and summer fruit for all our guests.

Mary has chosen the one necessary thing. May we all have time this summer, to sit at the feet of Jesus, to listen to music or the lapping of waves, to watch Zachary walk, to be filled, that we may fill others. Amen.

Lillian Perigoe