

July 17, 2022

C: Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

# *The Real Story of Mary and Martha*

A Homily Expositing Luke 10:38-42

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Happy Pride, dear FBCR!

How many Baptist churches do you suppose there are whose services or sermons or some part of their liturgy began with those words today or at some point during the months of Pride? Representatives of our congregation marched alongside a few of them in the Pride parade yesterday, so the answer is most definitely not, “Zero,” thanks be to God. We are (and those we marched with) and some others are, however, still quite in the minority. That means of course, that we’ve still got a lot of work to do, yes?

There is a story to be told about God’s love for everyone – and not a story about God’s love despite our failings or shortcomings or disorientations. It is true God loves us beyond our faults, but Pride reminds us that the more important word from God that we have to carry is that *you* are beloved of God just as you are. There is a story we have to tell of God’s expansive creativity that breathed into existence more than merely man and woman, that human sexuality is itself a tapestry woven of many threads and people cast in a thousand shapes and a million colors and all of that is not reluctantly accepted by an acquiescing God, but celebrated and affirmed by the one who created it in the first place! We have a story to tell, we have work to do.

That’s why I’m proud of you, FBCR, for being the kind of church who is willing and able to see God’s sometimes subtle and sometimes loud call away from the status quo in scripture. Like the way that this ancient text served up for us by the lectionary today dispenses quickly with the way that gender roles were constructed in the first century. Women didn’t spend much time in discipleship in those days, they had another role in society. That’s what pitted Mary’s sitting at the feet of Jesus against Martha’s domestic busyness in today’s pericope.

The chapter we’re reading began with Jesus sending 70 of his followers out into the wider world to serve and teach and heal and he gave them specific instructions on how to interact with and to rely upon the hospitality of those they encountered in the places they went. Today it is Jesus’s turn to be the itinerant. In an unnamed village Jesus has come calling and Martha has made her home open to him. Martha knows what is involved, but her sister Mary seems oblivious. While Mary sits and chats with Jesus, Martha goes about the domestic chores involved with hospitality. It doesn’t say precisely what she’s up to, but it doesn’t take much imagination to picture the tidying up and the preparation of sleeping space and preparation of food that has to be done when a guest comes calling, especially an unannounced guest as it seems Jesus was.

When Martha appeals to her guest to have his conversation partner instead come and help with all the cooking and cleaning he reveals his position on gender roles. Mary rather than Martha has chosen “the better part.” Yes, it might more often be men who do the listening and the learning of discipleship, but in Jesus’s mind women not only *can* engage the same activity, but *should* be engaged in it. I am proud of us FBCR for being able to see and affirm God’s call against regressive gender norms in our sacred stories like Martha and Mary – or at least I would be – if any of that were actually *in* the story of Martha and Mary.

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

Don't get me wrong, I believe that in a thousand ways directly and indirectly Christian scriptures and the person of Christ who lies behind them have a wider understanding of humanity than the roles we ascribe to people because of our perception of their gender. The story of Martha and Mary is certainly an example of Jesus's wider circle including women doing things that women usually didn't and perhaps ought not do. But it is so implicitly, not explicitly. For generations this story has been told as one in which Martha is compelled to remove the sudsy dish gloves and come on over to be with Jesus in discipleship. The problem with that is there are exactly zero domestic chores mentioned in this text at all! The word that describes Martha's preoccupation is translated in the version we read from today as "tasks," and in other translations is often rendered as, "service." Martha was preoccupied with serving, but in nearly every instance of this word in the rest of Luke and Luke's other volume, Acts, the word means service in leadership. In fact, it's the word from which we take the word, "deacon." Martha's not doing the dishes. She's tending to the details of ministry – coordinating people, making plans, procuring needed goods, communicating upcoming efforts, and if my life is any indication, sending and responding to fourteen thousand emails!!

So if domestic chores aren't in the text, where did they come from in the way this passage has been preached and written about and taught for generations? If they're not in the story, why have they been in my imagination of the story all these years!? They come from me – and from my culture, my upbringing. When a woman is said to be in a home and serving when a man is present, my anticipation is that she's probably doing the cooking and the cleaning and the making of the beds – not at all because I think that's what she *should* be doing, but because in my experience that's how things typically play out. Do you see? The understanding of gender roles that is being subverted in this story aren't the ones from the first century. They're the ones I carry within me – and perhaps the ones you carry with you too. We brought all that stuff to the text, not the text to us.

It's problematic enough that we add layers of meaning that may or may not be there to a biblical text because of our preconceived notions, but we do this sort of thing all the time and in every way. Those of us who are cisgender (that means our experience of our gender identity lines up with cultural expectations based upon markers of sex given us at birth) understand and appreciate that others don't have the same experience, but we bristle a bit when reminded that using preferred pronouns is important, because to us, it just seems trivial. We white people continue to perpetuate phrases like, "I'm colorblind, I don't see race," because we don't realize that in so doing white identity will be upheld because our society is built around it whereas identities of people of color are marginalized and penalized by society. We dudes talk a good game about breaking down barriers in gender roles and then when it's time for the table to be cleared we just keep talking that good game while the women around us do the dishes – because that's what our experience has been – OR we *do* clear the table and do the dishes then look for our accolades for doing a chore we didn't have to do, why!? Because we're dudes.

We bring elements of our understanding, our identity, our experience of the world to everything we do. That's inevitable and that's not all bad, in fact, it's very very good – except when it isn't. So how do we know the difference?

We hear the story of Martha and Mary for what it *actually* says rather than what we've been conditioned to hear. Martha has taken Jesus into her home in the same way that the 70 disciples of Jesus were taken into the homes of those who supported their mission. That's got a little to do with provision, but it has more to do with support for and participation in their redemptive work. Martha and Mary aren't homemakers – or they may be, but that's not the part of their identity fronted in this story – they're co-laborers with Jesus. Sure, he's in their home, but he can do his own dishes, they've got important things to do if the mission they share equally is going to come to pass. Except, the laboring in service can take a pause for a moment. It is good too, essential actually, says Jesus to sit with God and to listen to the present Christ. It is that presence with God and that listening that informs, equips, and empowers the serving in the first place. Yes, there are gender dynamics at play in the story, but to hear only that is to major on what is already taken for granted in the story itself. If we say to the text, "Hey women can be servants of Jesus," the story will say back to us, "No kidding, Sherlock. Try to keep up." Rather the story rightly emphasizes the need for reflection in discipleship, not just action. It does this, though, only after spending a chapter teaching about the need for active service. Martha in this story

exemplifies all the things Jesus has been teaching in the tenth chapter of Luke about going into the world and serving. Mary exemplifies the other side of the coin of Jesus's encouragement – reflection, listening.

Yes, dear friends, we've got work to do and a story to tell. That's why it is so vitally important for us to do things like march in the Pride Parade – for people to see that there are clergy and churches and communities in which all identities actually *are* celebrated and loved. But even while we're doing the work and telling the story, we have some reflection to do, so some listening to do. And where else can we find the voice of Christ among us but in the lives and stories of Christ's creation – the stories less celebrated, the lives less valued. The best way to celebrate Pride, the best way to heed the call of Martha and Mary is to listen.

Amen.

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Announcement about technology changing.

One Wednesday evening something wonderful happened. Our little faith community got together to celebrate at a baseball game. For just a little while the work of affirmation, the work of justice which so often calls us to do difficult things – was easy, joyful, fun. All we had to do that evening to demonstrate the love and support of the LGBTQIA+ community was show up, be together, and join our voices in cheering on the home team. And here was a particularly fun part. One of our own, George Haeefele was selected to be the “playball kid.” They gave him this cool Tshirt and as the game was about to start he went down on the field to a microphone and at exactly the right time he said, “Playball!,” and as if on cue, they did!

Friends we're gathered this morning with exactly the same purpose. Pride weekend is an important time for congregations who wish to be not only welcoming, but affirming of persons and communities who have not always had that blessing from the church. We have celebrated at a baseball game and at a parade yesterday and today we gather once more in celebration of glorious diversity of diversities that is God's creation. It is our togetherness that marks the occasion and generates the joy, so let us prepare our hearts for worship. Or to say that another way...PLAYBALL!