

(Psalms 52:8-9 NRSV)

⁸ I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever. ⁹ I will thank you forever, because of what you have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good.

(Luke 10:38-42 NRSV)

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."

Copyright © 1998 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Set Free from the Kitchen

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: July 19, 1998

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Luke 10:38-42

This morning's story is hard to swallow. Martha is working like crazy around the house. And Mary, her sister, is sitting doing nothing. Well not exactly doing nothing. She's just sitting around listening to Jesus talk.

This story evokes strong emotions against the unfairness in many of us. Joanne Thomson, the last minister of Prospect Church before our merger got so mad at this story I thought she wouldn't preach about it. It conjures up images of Cinderella scrubbing out the fireplace while her stepsisters play and dance at the prince's ball.

It fits right into our own experience, even in the church. How we hate it when it seems that only a few are doing all the work. The community is at its happiest and its healthiest when it feels as though the load is being shared. But things become a drag when some feel burned out while they see others who don't carry their weight. Oh yes, we have all felt like Martha at one point or another, working hard, put-upon and underappreciated. We've all felt at some time a greater weight than we wish to bear on our shoulders, a weight we feel we cannot throw off in good conscience, but a weight we sure would have liked some help with.

In this story of Martha and Mary, instinctively most of us, I should think, find ourselves in Martha's corner. We find ourselves cheering for Martha and resenting her lazy and oblivious sister, Mary. And we expect some relief, some pithy saying from Jesus about this obviously unfair situation.

After all, isn't Jesus the one who expects his disciples to work and to serve. Remember when he is teaching out at the edge of the sea, the multitude is 4000 strong. It was growing late. Everyone was tired and hungry. The disciples said to Jesus that it was time to send the throng home for supper. But Jesus insisted that his tired band feed them all. A few fish and loaves of bread were multiplied, and a great story of serving much from little arose, a story of much given not just from a little food but also of much given when everyone was tired out, much given when there was but a little energy. This story of feeding the 4000 would become a hallmark of Jesus' idea of how things ought to be done. Surely this Jesus would tell

Copyright © 1998 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Mary to get up and help her industrious sister. Surely this Jesus would have little sympathy for the slacker Mary.

But Jesus disappoints us, and he confuses us. He tells overworked Martha that she's wrong to complain and that what she is doing isn't so important, increasing her sense of carrying the load alone and, even more, increasing her sense of being underappreciated.

For all the people who have sweated in the kitchen to put on the pot-luck, who have worked into the night on committee work or to get the financial reports in order, who have planted flowers and shrubs in the front of the building, corralled the kids for the pageant rehearsals, prepared and taught the Sunday School classes, spent hours and weekends to put out the newsletter, gotten here early to sing in the choir, put on the fairs, run the thrift shops, baked the pies and glued the crafts, pledged the pledges, fixed the sink, washed the curtains and painted the walls, fixed the floors and mended the carpet – for all these people Jesus' reaction to Martha's complaint may feel like a slap in the face.

Burton Mack, the Biblical Scholar, one of the now famous Jesus Seminar, has proposed that Jesus was essentially a Cynic philosopher. Cynic philosophy is where our word cynical comes from, but Cynic philosophy isn't exactly cynical. A Cynic philosopher may be pictured as a bit of an odd-ball, sitting around outside the city gates saying provocative and sometimes enigmatic sound bites. Many places in the Gospels Jesus seems to fit the bill. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar and unto God what is God's." "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

And sometimes Jesus is very provocative, as when, in Mark, he refuses to come out to see his own mother and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

I'm not sure that Jesus was a Cynic philosopher, but Mack is onto something important when he points out Jesus' propensity to make these short pronouncements. These pronouncement are designed to get your attention. I doubt very much that Jesus actually refused to acknowledge his own mother. But I can very well imagine his making this provocative gesture to drive home just how important are the relationships among everyone in the human family, and that blood ties should not obscure our more important relationships as brothers and sisters simply because we are all children of God.

I have no doubt that Jesus made his provocative statements about Martha's complaint against Mary as an attention getter, too, and to drive home a couple of

important points. I have no doubt that Jesus had respect and appreciation for Martha and her effort, just as he loved his own mother.

The way the story is told, that may not be quite clear. The way it's told makes it more provocative. Unfortunately, like the story about Jesus' mother, this can cause us to follow the wrong thread of reasoning, which I suppose Jesus would say shows how likely we are to miss the points he wants to make. We can and do get caught in resentment at Jesus' apparent chastisement of Martha. But what I believe Jesus is saying is that work isn't the whole story, or even the most important part of the story.

We run a similar risk in the church of today. There is so much to do, so much that is important to do. And it takes effort and hard work. But in the end, it's not the painting or the pot-lucks, not the finances or furnace, not the newsletter or the needle-point, in themselves that are important. We can get so caught up in them that we forget that these are all done in service of building a community of faith, we can get so caught in the details and the score keeping that we forget that these are all done in service of making a time and a place for this community of faith to worship God, to find support in our struggles and to hear the liberating message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we can get so mindful of the work we do that we forget that we do the work because we are here to build a church that helps those who need our help and to welcome those who come in search of a community of faith. When we're getting grumpy in the kitchen or in the yard or at the coffee hour, Jesus wants us to remember our real priorities, and that's a good reminder.

I suppose it would be enough if the meaning of the story ended there. Martha would be a bit chastised, but she would also receive a valid reminder of the real priorities. After all, Jesus was in her house and she was missing his teaching. Jesus is in our house, and he doesn't want us to miss his teaching, too.

But this story has one more level, and this other level is worth the whole trip, worth the whole enigma, worth all the possibilities for misunderstanding, and worth even more than the reminder about priorities.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the Biblical scholar, believes that the most interesting and meaningful way to approach the Biblical text is to look for the embedded struggle in the text, the embedded struggle that the text addresses.

When we look at this story this way, the first thing we may notice is that Martha is living out a role that most women even today may understand as theirs. Martha is busy around the house, making sure the work gets done, attending to the details, serving the guest. Mary has broken the rule and the role. But what if Mary had been a man. What if it had been Barry instead of Mary sitting with Jesus talking. Then we would have had a story of Martha doing the housework kinds of things and her brother Barry sitting with Jesus absorbing the teaching. Most

people even today have been socialized in such a way that this scenario would be more acceptable and less scandalous when it's Barry instead of Mary.

Then, and unfortunately now, too, Mary may appear more lazy than Barry doing exactly the same thing. The struggle embedded here is the struggle for equality in roles, expectations and freedom.

Here, two thousand years ago, we have Jesus demonstrating the full dimension of the freedom of the Gospel. When Paul said that in Christ there was neither male nor female, he meant it. Jesus' Gospel goes the full distance.

Jesus was not only saying that we can all get distracted from the point, that we can get our priorities mixed up, that we can all miss the forest for the trees. He was definitely saying that, and that was an important part of his message. But he was also saying that the gender roles which meant that Martha's place was supposed to be stuck in the kitchen serving when Jesus himself was at her house teaching the gift of life, the idea that Martha should miss his visit was dead wrong. In the final analysis this story is not a criticism of, or even a reminder to, Martha so much as it is an invitation to her to come from the kitchen into circle of conversation, into the circle of teaching, and into the circle of important things.

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of this invitation from the kitchen to the parlor, so to speak. The old notion was that after dinner the women retired to the kitchen to clean and gossip while the men retired to the parlor to smoke cigars and talk of the important topics. It meant both that women were left out of the important conversation and presumably they were judged either incapable or unworthy of being in on it. On both counts Jesus is changing the rules and the perceptions.

Jesus is inviting the full complement of the human family into the important facets of the Gospel. Among those facets are a reminder not to lose focus on the reasons we are a church and a people of faith to begin with, and not to get caught up in distractions. The other reminder, or maybe even a new proclamation, is that that focus, that journey of faith, that listening to the deep religious and spiritual teachings, that being involved in the important things, and that tending to the necessary details belongs to us all equally, irrespective of who we are or whether we are a man or a woman. In the end, Jesus used a provocative, maybe even slightly misleading, means to let Mary know that she wasn't Cinderella, but that she was the holder of an embossed invitation to the ball. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Copyright © 1998 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Used by permission. All rights reserved.