

Proper 11/year C
Genesis 18:1-10a
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

A Martha *and* Mary Moment

Today's Gospel reading from Luke tends to make women feel uncomfortable. Because there really aren't that many stories about women in scripture, we tend to pay close attention to those that do, but this one cuts a little close to the bone. I think it is safe to say we would all prefer to sit at Jesus' feet to be able to listen to what he has to say and simply take in the miracle of his presence.

And someone also has to make dinner. Let's face it, one of the things you don't here in this story is any of Jesus' disciples saying, "Martha, why don't you go ahead and join Mary, we'll take of things."

The practice of hospitality was a particularly important one in the ancient Hebrew culture. We see this in our first reading, when the Lord, in the guise of three men, appears to Abraham. The first thing Abraham does is to arrange for their comfort by having Sarah prepare cakes, something she does without hesitation.

So for Mary to not assist Martha in providing for the comfort of their guest would not only be seen as inconsiderate but almost culturally taboo.

But when we look at Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels, we see breaking taboos was usually the least of his concerns. His words to Martha, are gentle but clear, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

People often see this story in terms of black and white: Mary is right, Martha is wrong. But to look at it so starkly, I think misses the point. It's not what Martha is doing is wrong but there is something taking place at that point in time which is more important and her attention would be better spent there.

There is much to be said for righteous activity, whether it is based on cultural expectations such as hospitality, righting a wrong, advancing the Gospel in the world, or taking care of people we love. All of these things are not only good but necessary.

But activity, even righteous activity, without reflection or time set aside to enjoy and appreciate what has been accomplished, can become an idol in and of itself, causing those who are always busy to sometimes think less of or even resent others who do take time out for reflection, rest, or just plain quiet.

So, looking at the story of Martha and Mary in this light, it is not so much about activity or business vs. listening and taking in the word of God but rather about putting these things in proper perspective, in their proper place.

Which includes learning to appreciate what I would call Martha *and* Mary moments.

I have talked about my marriage before so I won't reiterate all the fascinating details but the *Reader's Digest* version is this: Skip and I were going to be married in June of 2000 before I was ordained. But when I realized my health insurance would end a couple of months prior to that date, we moved it up to December of 1999 so I wouldn't have to pay a lot of money to cover those months.

So that fall with me in New York beginning my last year of seminary and Skip in San Diego recovering from his first, and somewhat unexpected, open heart surgery, we planned our wedding to take place at a friend's house when I came back to San Diego for winter break.

On the day before my wedding, I bought my dress and shoes, and stopped at Costco to pick up drinks and food for the reception. Later in the afternoon, Skip and I met with John Chane, who was dean of the Cathedral at the time and was going to marry us, to talk about our service. And then in the evening we made dinner for our families.

It wasn't until the next evening when I was at my friend's house getting ready that it hit me I was getting married. Soon. Like in 30 minutes. I briefly considered passing out. However, as that didn't seem like a good option I somehow managed to hold it together.

But when we assembled in the living room for the ceremony, and I looked at all the people there—people we loved and had been so helpful in making this day happen, I had, or I think more accurately was given, a profound Martha and Mary moment. I was old enough to know marriage can take work, but at the same time, savor what was happening right then. I felt such joy and gratitude in that moment, and ready to take on the next steps in our lives together—knowing some would be easier than others.

Martha and Mary moments are found in all marriages or lifelong committed relationships, but in those in which one or both of the persons in it are people of faith, the rhythms of those moments are often felt, if not more deeply, then at least differently because they provide openings to see God at work in our lives in ways we wouldn't see otherwise.

We may be distracted by many things but God will show us the better part and it will not be taken away from us.

But there is something else at work also. For those of us who are Christians, we cannot overlook the importance of how our faith communities help us to recognize this better part—to see Jesus and be Jesus for each other and the world. As Paul says in his letter to the Colossians, "Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him."

We are created to love God and to love each other. And it is often in our most intimate relationships—intimate in body, mind, and soul, we see the image of the invisible God and begin to understand the depth of God's all encompassing passion and love for us.

This Cathedral community has been abundantly blessed, and continues to be blessed, with many couples who are in loving, committed long term, Christ-filled relationships. Their presence is an amazing witness of what the better part looks like.

But, we have not been able to formally bless the relationships of our Lesbian and Gay members—a situation which has caused great pain for many here and diminished the ability of all of us to find and proclaim the image of the invisible God, an image often found in the relationships of our Lesbian and Gay members and friends because they know some things about fidelity and steadfastness in the face of hardship those of us who are straight cannot fully appreciate.

But a Martha and Mary moment is now upon us.

Approximately two weeks ago, Bishop Mathes sent a letter to all clergy in the Diocese saying he will permit the blessing of same gender relationships in churches in this Diocese, under certain conditions.

Among them, parishes wishing to do blessings must engage in a parish wide study of the issue such as the one found in the *Holiness in Relationships Task Force Report* and submit a letter or resolution to Bishop Mathes from the vestry, or in our case Chapter, indicating support for their clergy to do blessings. We have done both and Bishop Mathes has said we may proceed.

It is a Martha moment because there is still work, righteous work, to be done in order to accomplish full inclusion—not the least of which is working towards marriage equality. But in terms of doing blessings, at this time there are additional requirements for same-gender couples.

And it is a Mary moment as well because we are finally able to witness to the world, what the fullness of loving relationships, grounded in faith look like; as well as celebrate the love of the couples who come to have their relationships blessed. They will fill this place with a profound joy, a holy joy.

And it will happen. As Bishop Paul Marshall says so beautifully in his book, *Same-Sex Unions, Stories and Rites*:

[t]o bless a union is to ask God to make it an experience of the kind and intensity of Christ's love, both for the couple and also for all who are touched by their life together. Thus blessing a union is not to wish it good fortune or merely to give thanks for it, although both certainly occur: it is to set it aside for a holy use, to perceive it to be grace-bearing, to *expect* God to use it.ⁱ

So today, mindful of the righteous work still to be done, let us not be distracted by many things but sit at the feet of Jesus and give thanks for the innumerable grace-bearing ways God will put to holy use all the unions blessed in this sacred space. We are witnesses to the new creation and this moment, this holy moment will never be taken away from us.

The Rev. Canon Allisyn Thomas
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ⁱ Paul V. Marshall, *Same-Sex Unions, Stories and Rites* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), p. 62.