
Mary Made Me Do It

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In the name of the God of creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this 8th Sunday after Pentecost. I confess to you all this morning that I would rather not give a homily on the story of Mary and Martha. I tried to get out of doing this by writing on Amos' a fine and interesting passage in a wonderful biblical text but my heart wasn't in it and, truth told, I knew that to do so would be to avoid the difficult work of wrestling with the Gospel, and with myself in it. Perhaps the best way to explain where and how I ultimately ended up where I did is to say, Mary made me do it.

But therein lies a tale, and to tell it I have to go back to 1986, when I was serving as a chaplain at what was then Egleston Hospital for Children on the campus of Emory. I did not want to be a chaplain at Egleston. I was drawn to Emory for my year of clinical pastoral education because I knew it was an excellent context in which to learn, with highly acclaimed supervisors, and it would prepare me for doctoral studies scheduled to start the following September. Vicky and I had two young sons—a newborn and a two year-old, and in the interview with the Director of CPE I let slip that I would prefer to work on the psychiatric unit—where I already had considerable experience—and I would rather not work at Egleston because, I reasoned compellingly, we had a baby and a toddler at home, and I thought the experience would be too painful, too close to home. So, predictably, that's exactly where they put me, for the entire year. Not surprisingly, I resisted this placement, as I am sure they suspected I would, and although I am ashamed to admit it, I wanted to quit. My ebullient and often over-functioning "Martha" side could not help me in the corridors where children's lives hung in the balance, and their parents, desperate for hope, looked to their caregivers through tear-filled eyes, for some glimmer of a reason to be hopeful. Often, I had none. One family in particular whom I shall call the Anderson's seemed to be drawn to me, and I to them. Their young son had been borne with an inability to deliver nutrition to his system, and was on total parenteral feeding, and not likely to live. He was the same age as our son Andrew, and I wanted desperately to be able to do something to fix his condition. I did not for a moment believe that his parents expected this of me, but ***I did***. My "Martha" self was unable to make it all better, and I panicked, and my hidden Mary side, buried so deeply, was of no use. I went into my supervisor's office and told him that I simply could not stay at Egleston, and that unless they transferred me, I was leaving the internship. Wisely, he mostly listened to my lamentation, and he told me to take the rest of the day off, talk it over with Vicky, and come back the next day and let him know. And then, with deep compassion in his eyes, he said "William, something important is going on here. Your shadow side is trying to tell you something. I hope you will have the courage to discover what it is. One thing is needed." I left Tolly's office with his words echoing in my ears, and with the certainty that I would not return.

My sisters and brothers, to believe that there are some things too difficult for God is to live without hope. To acknowledge that nothing is beyond the power of God is to live in a world of infinite possibility. To be hopeful, in this way, is the necessary requisite for hospitality, in its most radical forms, and the deep gratitude that comes with it, to occur. And, this may mean we have to look at aspects of ourselves we'd rather not see, our hidden, shadow selves, that may have something to teach us. And we may be surprised by what we find. As the poet Wendell Berry said so well; ***To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and***

is traveled by dark feet, and dark wings. We may have to provide hospitality, in hope, to the Mary or the Martha in us we'd rather not acknowledge. We may have to find courage to go dark.

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus is the one who receives the hospitality. Following his exchange with the lawyer, which we considered last week, he and his disciples continue on their way to the village of Bethany, where they are welcomed into the home of a woman named Martha. While Martha is busy providing hospitality for her guest, her sister Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." Exasperated by the lack of assistance from her sister, Martha complains to Jesus that Mary has left her to do all the work—"what we family therapists would call a triangulation"—in the service of alleviating Martha's anxiety. Jesus replied that Martha is "worried and distracted by many things" while "only one thing is needed," the exact same words my supervisor said to me. In this, Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better part."

It is between the Scylla and Charybdis of being and doing that my own Homeric personal and theological odyssey seems destined to roam. And I know toward which of these creatures I am constantly tending. In the Lord's rebuke of Martha, I hear myself rebuked. I suppose anyone with a Martha streak does. A wonderful country song of a few summer's back, by Brooks and Dunn, contained the following lines: *"I learned the path to heaven, is full of sinners and believers; I learned that happiness on earth ain't just for high achievers, I learned, I've come to know, there's life at both ends of that red dirt road."* It is a great country song. The problem is, I have trouble believing the part about the over achievers, the doers, the Martha's—among whom I prefer to count myself. Oh, I get it intellectually, and I even understand the danger of a work's righteousness theology—we can't earn our way into God's good graces by our busyness and multi-tasking. Grace is given freely, I know, and yet, I've always felt Jesus was a little hard on Martha. Most of us who fall into this category are "troubled by many things," and with good reason. We see things that need doing, and we often get in over our heads trying to do them all. For years I had a quote over my desk—biblical in origin I believe, that "from those to whom much is given, much is expected." I used this, unsuccessfully I might add, to justify my inability to be more "balanced," as popular spirituality mentors would have me be. Sometimes we can get ourselves in trouble, dear one's quoting scripture to suit our own agendas. And, to make matters worse, there are those who believe that for every one of us who is outwardly a Martha, there is within us a hidden Mary, seeking to find expression, and that not giving her an opportunity is, well, psychologically and spiritually unhealthy. It's all about balance.

In Jungian psychology, for example, that part of our unconscious consisting of repressed weaknesses, shortcomings, and instincts is called our "shadow side." According to this theory, my external Martha self, which I prefer to present to the world, hides a much more Mary-like persona—a shadow self I am at risk of projecting onto others by turning my own personal inferiority—in this case my difficulty with sitting still, and simply being, and paying attention, and in that stillness looking at aspects of my self, and perhaps my relationship with God, I'd rather not see—turning all of this into a perceived moral deficiency in others.

One of my favorite authors, the novelist Walker Percy, once said that the best thing that ever happened to him was that he contracted tuberculosis while working as a pathologist at Bellevue Hospital in New York. Confined for 3 years to a sanitarium upstate, he began to read philosophy, literature, and theology, and became a National Book Award winning author. He was perhaps our most insightful theologically oriented novelist—a writer whose novel, *The Moviegoer*, ultimately motivated me to attend seminary. Percy often said that getting sick gave him a chance to step off the fast track to success—to reflect on the loss of values that sustain and nourish our souls—values that bring out and affirm the sacred amidst our human brokenness. Toward the end of one of his novels, *The Second Coming*, Percy has an ancient but clear-eyed Episcopal priest express his sadness at the state of the country: "How can we be the best dearest most generous people on earth and at the same time so unhappy? How harsh everyone is here! How restless! How impatient! How worried! How sarcastic! How unhappy! How hateful! Why is it that we have more than any other people, are more generous with what we have, and yet so selfish, anxious, and unhappy?"

Is today's Gospel text a cautionary tale, like Percy's priestly caveat, lest we miss the whole point of our journey in the maelstrom of our frenetic busyness? Do we have to get sick to stop and listen to the heartbeat of our own lives? Of course, the clinician in me knows that this often does happen. Perhaps Jesus is trying to liberate Martha from the burden of obsessive duty. He says to her "Martha, Martha," do not do this violence to yourself. "One thing is needed." Commentators tell us that he may be referring both to the Kingdom of God, and to a single—and sufficient—dish of food. The defense that Martha might have offered—that I myself have offered—is that somebody has to trouble herself or himself "about many things," or they won't get done. Who among us "Martha-ites" hasn't said that? I tell my students at Columbia to monitor

their time" to take care of themselves" but it can be so hard to practice what I preach. In such a defense, however, lies a two-edged sword that Jesus is trying to pry away from Martha, and from people like her" and me. The edges of that sword, according to the theologian Garret Keizer, are excessive devaluation of one's own worth, and excessive valuation of one's own importance. Excessive devaluation, in that sitting in the parlor with Jesus is "all right for some," but "too wonderful for the likes of little me." Excessive valuation, in the sense that the world seems to rest on Martha's shoulders, not God's.

Well, I stand here before you, having successfully hoisted myself on my own petard, and now, what is there left to say? We might ask what if Martha had done no serving at all" what would have happened then. Or this: what was *really* bothering Martha? She doesn't complain to her sister about slacking off, but to Jesus, for letting her sister get away with it. Martha suspects that Jesus loves the "spiritual" sister more, that Jesus has little regard for the mundane tasks with which she busied herself. She is mistaken. Suppose for a moment that Martha had simply laid out a huge meal. I doubt that Jesus would have dismissed it with some quaint adage about simplicity. He would have praised her labor of love, and dug right in. It is only when Martha's labor of love becomes a *complaint* that he questions her role" her "troubling about many things." In other words, when we begin to ask in our hearts, "why am I doing this all by myself?" Jesus joins in the asking, "Why indeed?" And perhaps the task is to steer our boats between the potentially idolatrous monsters of nothing but *doing*, and nothing but *being*. Perhaps the theologian Paul Tillich was right in reminding us to keep in mind that which is ultimate" especially when we seek in our anxiety to be grounded by that which is decidedly not of ultimate concern. Perhaps the feminist theologians are correct in suggesting that, in his response to Mary, Jesus was inviting women into lives of intellectual and spiritual discipline" at least as one option" and thereby breaking old societal norms that would keep them exclusively in the kitchen. I hope this is the case.

I guess in some ways, however, I'm not much further along than when I began this morning. But I can tell you this. I can tell you that I went back the next day to resign my internship, and before I could do so my supervisor handed me a note from the Anderson's that read: "Thanks for inviting to take us to Everybody's for pizza. We'd love to go. Come by around lunch." In that moment, I got it. I had lost sight of what Mary, and my supervisor, knew, and what this couple who taught me so much also knew, and I did not. What they wanted from me was what Jesus wants from us, and what we were created by God to desire" and that is to be *in relationship*. And that is bountiful plenty to saw grace over. And, I suspect I know the answer to that earlier question: what would have happened if Martha had done no serving at all? People would have started to get hungry. And then, perhaps, Jesus would have done for Mary and Martha what we do here each Sunday, and will do again, in just a moment. He would have headed for the kitchen, and found the bread, and broken it" and, well, we all know the rest of the story. So let's do, and be that story, shall we? Amen.