
Gospel of Our Emerging Sisterhood

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 11 – Year C

There's an old joke that some of us have heard many times, but others just a few times or not at all. In any case it's worth retelling because it connects with our gospel reading for today. But if you haven't heard it, it helps to know that it refers to the "Feeding of the Five Thousand." That's the miracle story where Jesus fed a crowd of five thousand people using only five loaves of bread and two fish (Matthew 14:13f., Mark 6:30f., Luke 9:10f., John 6:1f.). The joke uses that miracle story to answer the question, 'How do we know that Jesus was a woman?' Now there are three answers to that question, and only the first reason refers to his miracle of feeding a huge crowd. Here's all three reasons.

Jesus was a woman because:

No. 1: He had to feed a crowd at a moment's notice when there was hardly any food.

Jesus was a woman because:

No. 2: He kept trying to get a message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it.

Jesus was a woman because:

No. 3: Even when He was dead, He had to get up because there was more work for Him to do.

(Posted at <https://www.godweb.org/Jesuswasawoman.htm>)

That's it: the three reasons why we know that Jesus was a woman. □

Now, as you may already know, that joke has five other variations, all told in a series. I'm going to disappoint you, maybe, by not telling the other five variations here today. (Maybe that will keep you coming back for more of these jokes, or these sermons. Or maybe not. Ha!) But I will tell you this: all the variations on that joke involve having fun with stereotypes.

Using some fun ways that we type-cast people, the joke says that there are "three equally good arguments" that Jesus was Black, three equally good arguments that he was Jewish, and three each that he was Italian, Californian, and Irish. But after going through all those variations—for Blacks, then Jews, Italians, Californians, and the Irish—then we get to the last one that I just told you: the three 'equally good reasons' that Jesus was a woman. Now that last reason is the ultimate one: that he had to get up even from the dead because there was more work for him to do. It's the last reason because that it refers to the key event of Jesus' resurrection, and at the same time to the way that women characteristically rise up; rise up from whatever else is going on in order to do work that needs to get done.

Now, as it happens, there's an internet article titled, "Could Jesus Have Actually Been a Woman?" (Elizabeth Farrelly, "Could Jesus Have Actually Been a Woman?" at <https://bit.ly/3PIUh54> posted April 1, 2015) But there are less sensational and less controversial ways to recognize and appreciate Jesus as a pro-woman man for his time. Take our gospel reading appointed for today. There we see Jesus identifying with a woman's desire to sit and learn instead of fulfilling a more traditional role. I'll have more to say about that later. But in addition to that story, today's scriptures also present us with this striking verse about a kind of suffering that's occurs when a special goal is deferred because of circumstances in the world around you. "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake," says Colossians in our passage for today. Here's the whole verse.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. (Colossians 1:24)

That's the apostolic idea here: that there are some forms of Christ-like affliction that we can rejoice to take on

ourselves, and to suffer for the sake of bringing about God's beloved community. Now there's not an obvious or necessary connection between that idea and today's gospel reading. However, in the context of some of the social issues of our time, I hear the Spirit making a connection that I'm compelled to share with us here today.

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Our gospel reading tells the story of two sisters who were some of Jesus' favorite women friends, Martha and Mary of Bethany. In Luke's short account Jesus is away from the crowds and enjoying the sisters' hospitality in the private space of their home. It's in that intimate space that Martha has the freedom, and enough self-regard, to complain to Jesus about her sister Mary's choice. For Mary has chosen to exercise a prerogative to sit and listen to Jesus' teaching. But she also seems oblivious to the fact that her sister feels abandoned with the housekeeping involved in Jesus' visit. And then, when sister Martha complains to Jesus about Mary's choice, he turns aside her complaint. Now he does so in a way we that we can imagine is said with gentle affection. "Martha, Martha," he says.

"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." (Luke 10:41-42)

Here Jesus rejects Martha's appeal because he empathizes with her sister's choice to sit and learn from him. That's the choice to be learner in a culture where women are often relegated to housework; where it's typical that men get to be learners. And in his customary way of overturning such cultural norms, Jesus joins forces with a woman's aspiration. In his countercultural way, he affirms her right and her choice to be a learner in that time and place. As we know very well in our own time and place, choice is a key feature of women's work and women's aspirations. But in the context of this story Jesus' empathy for Mary's choice can seem one-sided; even prejudicial against a woman who may value housekeeping as a worthy commitment, to be shared and negotiated in the family circle.

Precisely here many commentaries on this story moderate Jesus' response to Martha by a kind of *post facto* conflict mediation, as it were: mediating the conflict between the two sisters in a way that Jesus resolves differently. They mediate the conflict by making Martha and Mary types of metaphors or symbols. Martha as a servant or worker symbolizes an *active* spirituality, whereas Mary as a learner represents a *contemplative* path. Not only that, they say, but the full picture is that we need both: both active and contemplative practitioners; both Martha types and Mary types. Finally, an even more wholistic perspective recognizes both personas in each of us. On occasion we're each called to be more activist in our choices and sometimes more contemplative, depending on circumstances, and as we are able to integrate both ways of being.

But what if we do something more ordinary and down-to-earth with this gospel story? What if we hear it in relation to today's pressing issues about women's work, women's aspirations, and women's choices in the home and in society? Beyond integrating activism and contemplation, or service and learning, how are we also called to integrate the work and choices of women in ways that complete what is lacking in Christ's suffering, as the scripture says. What would that even mean or involve?

Across the millennia women have been relegated to roles that serve others: serving others with their bodies in contexts that are domestic or family oriented, reproductive, and institutional. Balancing their freedom in those roles, and their choices with other needs and imperatives, may be a complicated or daunting task. But that appears to be the kind of unfinished work that we are being challenged to complete today. What might that look like in our current day?

I have two responses, a personal story about sisters, and a visionary or prophetic story about a more universal sisterhood. Here's my personal story first. As I was coming of age as a boy, I somehow imagined a story that has shaped the man I am today. It's a story that involves my mother's large family of eleven siblings. Counting my mother, that's fourteen childbirths for my grandparents on her side of the family: and my mother, Josephine, as the last one still living among those seven sisters and seven brothers—two of whom, sadly, died in childbirth.

Now my grandparents were committed to getting as many of those children through college as possible. Like many aspiring African American families back in the 1940s, and especially after WWII and after the G.I. Bill of 1944, my grandfather found money for them all to go to college. But in that large family only one of the men was a vet, and there were other gender dynamics as well. So it happened that only two of mom's five living brothers went to college and only one of them graduated. On the other hand, all seven of the family's daughters attended college, and all but one of them graduated. That gender profile has always been compelling for me, and poignant as I made my own way through college in the 1960s. For some reason I fantasized a fable that mom tells me is not true: the fable that her brothers deferred the completion of their own

college careers in order to ensure that their sisters could financially and logistically complete theirs.

Although that was a fable of my own making, it's still useful as an illustration of today's apostolic theme in Colossians. Again, that's the theme of completing what is lacking for the sake of others, and for the sake of emulating a model or ideal. For the reasons I've mentioned already, that's the kind of ethic or way of life that may be commendable today.

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Finally, however, there is also a more visionary and social illustration of that theme. In today's gospel, where Jesus so strikingly identifies with a woman's role-changing aspiration, it's as if he himself becomes part of the sisterhood of Martha and Mary; maybe like an elder sister enmeshed in their sibling rivalry. In any case, many other of his dealings with women's issues are well portrayed in the gospel of Luke as well as other gospels, where he is even notorious for including women and fostering their integrity and equality.

Now it's that legacy that explains Paul's egalitarian pronouncement in his letter to the Galatians. You may recall the verse that reaches its ultimate expression with a gender reference:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

That kind of apostolic warrant explains why many Christians throughout the centuries insist that conventional gender roles and identities are transcended by our unity in Christ. To live into that unity in our own time, we too might prophetically reclaim the church as a kind of 'sisterhood,' as a way of complementing or balancing the conventional masculine terms, 'brotherhood' and 'fellowship.' Indeed, one of my favorite humanist mentors coined the slogan, "All men are sisters," and wrote eloquently about what he called the 'sisterhood of all humanity.'

Another secular writer, Jeremy Rifkin, has coined a related term: "empathic civilization," in his book and videos with the same title. (Jeremy Rifkin: *Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*; 2010 book and YouTube videos). I commend that term because it echoes the key feature of Jesus as an empathic person in our gospel story today: Jesus as empathetic with Mary's choice and aspirations. But today, Rifkin argues, we are reaching beyond empathic persons toward becoming an empathic civilization. The idea of an empathic civilization thus offers a humanist way of envisioning an emerging culture, not yet fully achieved, and still struggling to arrive. In that struggle we might describe today's Martha and Mary gospel not only in the familiar church context; as a struggle to integrate activist spirituality with contemplative.

Rather, in a social context this gospel also forecasts today's struggle to make so-called women's work and women's aspirations integral to every human being, including us men or male-gendered human beings. (Cf. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*; NY: Random House, 1991¹) In that case the church may be co-suffering, alongside our entire civilization, in a struggle to integrate our divergent identities in order to achieve our full humanity. Here we may be suffering along with an aspiring humanity that is valiantly struggling to achieve wholistic emergence in our time. If so, let us therefore commit to complete what is lacking in that endeavor, as both a noble and a holy endeavor. Let us also, along with others of different faiths or humanist faiths, be true to today's gospel witness; the witness to the wholistic mission of Jesus Christ, shining across the millennia to our own time today, as if we too were hearing him say to us as he said long ago to Martha in a gentle tone:

My people, my people, you are distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. And some are choosing the better part, which will not be taken away from them.

Amen.

[1] "We have scarcely begun to integrate . . . [what] paradoxically, only the opening to the feminine will enable us to integrate. Each perspective, masculine and feminine, is here both affirmed and transcended, recognized as part of a larger whole; for each polarity requires the other for its fulfillment. And their synthesis leads to something beyond itself: It brings an unexpected opening to a larger reality that cannot be grasped before it arrives, because this new reality is itself a creative act.

"But why has the pervasive masculinity of the Western intellectual and spiritual tradition suddenly become so apparent to us today, while it remained so invisible to almost every previous generation? I believe this is

occurring only now because, as Hegel suggested, a civilization cannot become conscious of itself, cannot recognize its own significance, until it is so mature that it is approaching its own death.

“Today we are experiencing something that looks very much like the death of modern man, indeed that looks very much like the death of Western man. Perhaps the end of “man” himself is at hand. But man is not a goal. Man is something that must be overcome--and fulfilled, in the embrace of the feminine.” Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*; NY: Random House, 1991; final paragraphs.

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