

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

July 18, 2010

Worship Theme: "In Defense of Martha"

Luke 10:38-52

For the past 10 days we have had the privilege and the joy of having our daughter Emily and her nearly 4 month old son Ronan with us. A new baby has a way of changing the agenda of each day. In between the times of joy when baby Ronan is cooing and smiling, there are also those stressful times that come with caring for an infant. If it were up to me to care for this baby, I seriously doubt that either of us would survive. But thank God for my wife and daughter, who know what and how to do what is needed when it is needed.

In our Gospel reading today, we have the story of Martha and Mary. Only in the Gospel of Luke, this story is all about doing what is needed. Many of you are familiar with the story of Jesus entering a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. Martha had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. Like the Martha Stewart we know today, this Martha is determined to be the perfect host. Naturally, she was frustrated with her sister Mary, sitting at the Lord's feet while she (Martha) was doing all the work.

I have preached on this text before, and usually come down on the side of Mary, who is "choosing the better part", listening to Jesus and sort of dismissing Martha in all of her busyness and being driven to distraction because of the work that is before her. Martha understandably wanted a partner with her sister as they hosted their Lord. You have to wonder if Martha would also have enjoyed the luxury of listening to the words of wisdom from Jesus. But if she did that, who was going to prepare the dinner? Who was going to do the important work that needed to be done?

In our house these past ten days, I have enjoyed working at the church, while I knew that our grandson was being well taken care of by his mother and grandmother. Oh, I have helped a little now and then, but of course I have the important work to do at the church, preparing a sermon, making hospital and home visits, and helping with the ministry of the congregation.

I guess I have the luxury of being like Mary in our story today.

But what if I had the responsibility of our grandson in addition to my duties at the church? As I said before, it would be a disaster!

Now we get to the title of today's message, "In defense of Martha." It is Martha who prepares the house for Jesus. It is Martha who takes responsibility for hosting. It is Martha in the kitchen, over the hot stove, cleaning up afterward, seeing to it that everything is done and done well.

Rev. Sarah Buteux, pastor of First Congregational Church in Hadley, MA shares these words about today's reading:

*"Truth be told, though Martha is the one who seems to be brought down a peg in this story, for many of us the realities of the world, of personal and church life, call forth the Martha in us. For if Martha doesn't do it who will? Certainly not Mary.*

*Mary, after all, chooses the "better part." So she doesn't have to do the dishes, or mail out the newsletter, or remember to buy wine for communion. That's great for Mary. But at the end of the day, the dishes still need to be done. And who's going to do them? My money's still on Martha."*

Yes, we need to come to the defense of Martha. We need to recognize how important it is that there are Martha's in the world, doing what needs to be done.

But our defense of Martha doesn't have to be at the expense of Mary, any more that the defense of Mary has to be at the expense of Martha. There is a place for both of them.

In fact, the simple beauty of the story of Mary and Martha has led many preachers down the proverbial primrose path. Some have used this story to contrast justification by faith (Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus and receiving the word from him) with the futility of justification by works (Martha doing the heavy lifting of seeing that all goes as planned). Others have suggested that this story is an endorsement of the superiority of the contemplative life (represented by Mary) over a life in the secular world (represented by Martha). Still others have claimed that the story is a commentary on the role of women in society. Thus, women who choose Martha's service role in the home over the intellectual pursuits modeled by Mary are less appreciated.

Let's look for a moment at the context of the story of these two sisters. Jesus ignores social taboos when he, a single man, comes into the home of two single women. The rabbis of his day would have been shocked and outraged by his going into this home, and then having the audacity of allowing a woman to sit at his feet as a follower. In that

day, this is how such behavior was viewed: “It is better to burn the Torah (the Hebrew bible, the first five books) than to teach it to a woman.”

So this story that sounds so innocent was in fact a radical story where the role of place of women is honored in the community of faith. This story is an event where the Lord comes into a home, is present for both Martha and Mary, does not condemn Martha for her understandable resentment, but by his presence shows once again how God, in human form, redeems and transforms the world, and redeems and transforms the little world of Martha and Mary, and finally transforms and redeems our world, whether we are Martha or Mary.

I close with a memory that seems appropriate for this story.

In my 11 years as pastor of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, I officiated at 126 funeral services. Many of them were at the church. I can still remember a handful of women (between four and six usually) that would be sitting at the back of the sanctuary during the funeral service. I knew they were the ones in charge of the reception in the fellowship hall following the service. They usually would stay for the opening songs, Scripture, sermon, and tributes. Then they would quietly slip out during the closing prayers to be present to serve at the reception that was to follow.

In the funeral service they were like Mary in our text, listening and participating in worship. After the funeral service they were like Martha, serving, and doing what was needed to be done.

Every full Christian life is rhythm of action and disengagement, involvement and reflection, hard work and quiet receptivity.

So let us rejoice that we can at times, be like Mary, receiving the gifts of learning and growth. But let us also honor the Martha’s of the world, taking care of the babies, serving the funeral lunch, sending out the newsletter, keeping everything running, knowing that it’s OK for Martha at times to be like Mary, and vice versa.

And maybe after the visit by Jesus both Martha and Mary came to appreciate each other and their important roles a little better.

Amen, and Amen...

