

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday 2016

Luke 10: 38-42

If you'll pardon the anachronism, Jesus here does family systems therapy at Bethany, which all groups need, even though I don't agree with his interpretation. It's not so important for a therapist, or homilist, to be correct as to get people to think about what is really happening. The episode of Martha and Mary appears as an isolated unit in Luke, but connects with two important recorded by John: the raising of their brother Lazarus and another special meal (John 11-12). Father Joseph's scholarly purity would want to keep the Luke scene apart from ones in John. But just as individuals should explore their role in the family, so should an individual incident stay connected to related events.

None of us exists in isolation, so the more we get connected, to our family members and our history, the more we will be whole. This process of connection is a metaphor for salvation, the goal of the spiritual life. Mary and Martha each show an aspect necessary for salvation. It is unfortunate that this story exalts the Mary component over the Martha one, for the two belong together, as the sisters belong together. We always come to God as part of a family, even if that is a monastic community, composed of those who live here and those who gather here. Today's story reminds us that most families are dysfunctional yet remain blessings.

The Bethany family system, like a monastic community was non-traditional. They had no picket fence or 2.5 children, even though religious culture of the time required matrimony. The irregularity may be why Jesus, himself unmarried and irregular, felt so comfortable there. Jesus and his friends should inspire sensitivity to what the church still considers irregular families. I wonder why three adult siblings stayed together. Were they each simply not "the marrying kind"? Was Lazarus a weak personality who needed nurturing from his sisters? In scripture Lazarus is silent and sickly, then dies young. Some wonder what he was like when Jesus raised him after four days in the tomb. In an odd play by Eugene O'Neill (1925), *Lazarus Laughed*, he simply laughed when questioned about his time in the land of the dead, laughed as they did in heaven. In his return he seemed to get younger and stronger, while others grew older and weaker. Did his sisters share this secret knowledge, or were they left out?

Today's gospel combines the kitchen-sink with drawing room conversation. The clash between the two results in theater of protest. The two sisters are dramatic foils for one another; they appear as one-trait characters though in reality they were more complex. Mary is dreamy and impractical. She *should* be giving a hand in the kitchen. Her passivity is depicted in the later scene after her brother's death when she sits paralyzed in the house. It is Martha, the hostess, who then goes out to meet Jesus. Mary's passivity exasperates. My friend Hazel would have said, "She means well but I could just shake her."

Martha sees a task through to conclusion, but needs appreciation.<sup>1</sup> Arms akimbo, she speaks up, sounds off, talks back. Like Job, though *maybe* on a lesser level, Martha voices her complaint. Observers find this behavior unpleasant, unnecessary, "strident," especially when it is not *our* problem. Martha shows that "Women's Lives Matter." She therefore joins this week's protest, and speaks for the voiceless. Her question is legitimate, "Don't you care?" "Don't you care that the burden is entirely left to me?" The question is not directly answered. Jesus says neither, "I do care," nor "I don't." The story thus has what Chekhov would call an unfired gun--if the writer puts a gun on the mantel, it should be fired by the end of the story--which I as a writer would correct.

There are many today who ask precisely this question and are not answered. It is asked in the church, where the majority, as we see in this room, women, are not sufficiently heard. When dispossessed people in our country ask, we as the privileged class living our safe and

protected lives should answer. Do we care about refugees, undocumented immigrants, the children gunned down at Sandy Hook school, innocent Muslims demonized for acts they had nothing to do with, a man shot dead for a broken taillight? I accuse myself on these questions, to which being sorry and sad are not good enough. We as a nation glibly observe national moments of silence while doing nothing about gun control, immigration, and economic inequality. Yes, we pray, we sit contemplating, but does that accomplish anything? Martha is impatient with this inaction, and her feeling, even if not the ultimate truth, is legitimate.

Mary sat at Jesus' feet. She hungered for insight more than she hungered for the food she should have been helping with in the kitchen. Jesus blesses Mary for her spiritual hunger. Does that mean he dismisses Martha's legitimate protest? It seems so in this story. Jesus answers Martha with a dismissive rebuke. Dissatisfied with that simplistic ending, I look further. I look to succeeding Bethany scenes.

When Lazarus dies Martha goes out to meet Jesus as the bridesmaids do in the parable. Long-practiced hospitality serves her well on this occasion. Characteristically, she meets Jesus with protest. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." She seems to know that Jesus deliberately dawdled. But she then allows him to lead the conversation--which is what prayer is: conversation with the Lord. By the end of their honest exchange, he draws from her a profound statement of faith: "Yes, I believe that you are the anointed, the son of God, the one who was to come."

This satisfying outcome makes her humble and generous. She does not resent that Jesus may prefer her sister. She goes inside to urge Mary, "Come, the Master wants you." Mary then speaks to Jesus as if she were Martha! "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Her protest is sharper than her sister's, as if to say "You could have been here but did not bother." Mary weeps, in the complex way that most of us weep: a mixture of authentic grief and childish petulance. This sets Jesus weeping, and from the intense emotion comes the amazing and eerie miracle. Lazarus comes forth is unbound.

The epilogue is another domestic scene at Bethany. The three family members are present in their usual roles, but bonded more tightly by the conflicts and traumas they have experienced. Lazarus, raised from the dead, sits at table, not saying anything, enjoying male privilege and the care of his sisters. Martha again serves the dinner, but this time without complaint. Jesus is part of their family, and yet he is set apart and "other." This is demonstrated by Mary's, whose behavior is a little manic, a little extreme, but, like the great truths, is outside of ordinary discourse.

I wonder whether Lazarus provided the ointment (after his return it would not have been needed), and whether Martha, though preferring to stay in the background, helped her sister plan the surprise. The guests watch in awe as the incredible ritual unfolds. Mary anoints Jesus' feet with a pound (clearly an excess) of pure nard, and wipes them with her hair. The fragrance fills the house; it envelops all the guests. Mary is criticized, as non-productive dreamers always are by the realists, but she is not criticized by Martha. Jesus again defends Mary. "Let her alone." As another version of the story records, "She has done a beautiful thing. Wherever my story is told, this incident will be told *in remembrance of her*." That's a very big, even sacramental, claim for Mary of Bethany who has just made Jesus ritually the Christ, the messiah, by anointing him. How did she feel when he said this? I don't think she was self-congratulating, as a politician who wins the nomination. I think she looked gratefully at her brother and sister, with whom and from whom she had learned so much in family therapy. She would have smiled through tears, and gone back to the kitchen, to help Martha serve.

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i' Today's New York Times, in an article about Britain's new prime minister, had this poem, which could have been spoken by Martha.

A woman always arrives  
to clear the table,  
sweep the floor, and open the window  
to let out the cigar smoke.  
...It never fails.