

Mary and Martha: A Powerful Story Lost in Time

This coming Sunday, we catch a glimpse into the deep reality that women were a very important part of Jesus' ministry. Mary Magdalene was not an oddity among Jesus' earliest followers either for being a woman, or for taking on many roles of service to Jesus and his mission that would normally belong to men in her culture.

In fact, early Christianity was mocked by many as a religion of women and slaves because women like Mary Magdalene were not unusual in the church. Even Paul sites strong female leadership in the churches that he founded, although those never make the headlines when people want to pick and choose scripture to oppress women in the church. Mary, *not a prostitute*, was highly visible and exceptionally gifted, and she had many female colleagues in Christian leadership.

We have all heard many sermons on this Sunday's gospel which features another strong Mary and her sister Martha, and nearly all of them could have borne a title along the lines of, "Why Martha Is Very, Very Wrong." Not only is this a misreading of the text, the true meaning of this story is far more powerful and important.

The story of Martha and Mary that we read on Sunday is *not* the story of an angry woman worker-bee who doesn't understand what's important in life. It is a shocking story -- shocking like "defibrillator paddles that can give life to people whose hearts have stopped beating."¹ *Jesus praises a woman for acting as though she were a man.* He endows her with the full rights and privileges of a male in that culture.

There's a lot in Sunday's gospel to rattle first century sensibilities, and to remind us in the here and now how far we still have to go for full inclusion.

Not only does this passage speak strongly against a view of roles for men and women that are static and divinely ordained, I think it points us toward a sacred reality:

God didn't create us to fill a particular role; a gender role or any other. God made us for love -- to be loved by God, and to express with our lives how God loves the world. Our primary role is as a beloved child of God.

We do not know what happened on that day that made Mary decide to take such a bold step. What we do know, what Jesus tells us, is that Mary's choice to be a "bad" woman and a thoughtless sister on this day is praised as the conduct of a good disciple.

The most privileged in our culture and society still want to prescribe roles to others that are less than a full seat at the table, to restrict the place at the feet of Jesus as full disciple. The roles we play, the roles that are forced upon us, can often lead us or restrict us from the fullness of God's call to us.

Jesus worked and pushed hard against this form of oppression in the Gospels. And we should too. The message of this Sunday's gospel is not that study with a rabbi or priest is more important than hospitality or housework. It's certainly not that women's work is inferior to men's. And we must come to full understanding that gender roles were not prescribed for us by God at Creation. To *remain* in this antiquated place of thought is spiritually perilous.

Perhaps the message is that we all may be called to be careful what roles and identities we place on others and on ourselves. And perhaps we are also called to relinquish roles, identities, patterns of behavior that feel "tried and true" or set in stone not only for the sake of growing in

our own discipleship, but so that others might claim the fullness of roles typically withheld from them by virtue of random societal decision.

In the gospel story, until we sympathize with the genuine challenge that Martha is facing, the internal turmoil that she is experiencing, we will only reduce this story into “Martha, Martha” as a condescending pat on the head. She is struggling because she is trying to respond well to what Jesus has put before her. That’s the kind of stormy anxiety that we must identify with in Martha. Jesus does not say that she is irrational or wrong-headed. He merely says that he will not stop Mary from her sitting and hearing.

What we don’t hear is that being busy or serving or getting things done or even rushing from this to that are, in themselves, the problem. The problem is when the distraction of the many take away the ability to capture the one, the good part.

In the end, Mary’s choice to sit at Jesus’ feet and hear the word is a choice Jesus affirms. Not over and against Martha, but against the notion that a woman has no place there. Jesus tells us she is entitled to be there and not obligated to leave that spot.

Finding our place at Jesus’ feet is a lifelong journey. A journey that might be dictated by many outside forces, but Sunday we are reminded that we can throw off tired, oppressive societal norms that keep us from our fullness in God. God calls us all as equal, beloved children and God’s love knows no boundaries.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+

^[1] David Lose, *In the Meantime*.