

"Mary's Gift"

Sermon on Sunday, July 21, 2019

Based on Luke 10: 38-42

"It was a hot July night, and everyone was gathered around the set, with the volume up loud. The grainy video we are all familiar with now was coming through the airwaves. The back and forth discussion between Mission Control and the astronauts - to my kid ears - sounded stark and serious. The transmission delay between phrases that we are now familiar with in any Air Traffic Control recording had very -- very long pauses in between... As Neil descended the ladder, I had no actual realization how monumental that was at the time, of course, as a kid. Truth be told, I was still processing questions in my kid-brain, like: 'why am I allowed to be up late now but not on other nights?'

The adults kept saying things like, "I can't believe this is really happening" and "wow, can you imagine?" etc. So that made me wonder about if I could trust what I was watching. I do remember turning to my Mom and asking, 'Is this real?' ...Immediately all adults in the room enthusiastically assured me that yes, this was really real. Really, really real. Wow. A man from our planet had walked on the moon."

Those are the memories of a woman who was about 6 years old at the time, visiting her grandmother in Erie, PA when she was allowed to stay up late. As you know, the date was July 20, 1969. On that night the world was sitting at the feet of those early space pioneers, watching anxiously and excitedly, hoping and praying that all would go well, witnessing history. Rare are the moments when people around the world give joint attention to an event that's not a disaster. Rare are the moments when young and old are gathered to watch history in the making. Fifty years ago that happened. Fifty years later we still marvel.

I know what you will think as soon as I continue: what a stretch to connect the moon landing in the summer of 1969 with the story of Martha and Mary in the gospel for this Sunday! What a stretch to compare two sisters from a tiny village in rural Palestine with an event that we find in every history book of the world. You are right. But you know, pastors have made stranger connections. It's the act of watching in transfixed awe that connects these two storylines, as different as they are. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and paid focused attention to her Lord, forgetting all the other distractions, appreciating this as the most important moment in her life. She was transfixed by something bigger than her own life - the god-reality in Christ, the wisdom that poured out of his heart. In fact, as she listened she probably landed in a different part of the universe, spiritually speaking. And there is also that: some people said, "Mary is a lunatic."

A female student listening to her chosen teacher? It does not seem strange to us in an era when universities have more female than male students. But in the first century, how commonly were women treated as disciples and encouraged to learn about their religious faith? Women were generally not even permitted to study the Scriptures with a rabbi. In this text, Mary takes the traditional male role of 'sitting at the feet' of the teacher. Jesus approves of her interest, for she is told that she has chosen the better part. It was a pretty progressive move. Consider this: first century Rabbi Eliezer said, "If a man gives his daughter knowledge of the law, it as though he taught her lechery." Rabbi Azzai expressed a different opinion, "A man ought to give his daughter a knowledge of the law." So, there were different points of view, but both Jesus and Mary it

seems, followed a vision in which equality would be a pretty normal thing. At their time they were probably considered lunatics, way ahead of their time.

"Mary has chosen the better part," Jesus said. What exactly did she choose, what was her special gift? Paying focused attention - mindfulness, to use a trendy word, was the gift that Mary brought to the table when Jesus visited their home. She was all ears. She listened with heart and soul and mind. She brought herself to the table. Her sister Martha brought food to the table; she was busy whipping a meal together. The two sisters probably made a good pair. Parents know that siblings rarely exhibit the same personalities and traits. The extrovert needs the introvert. The busy person needs someone who is more laid back and patient. And we all develop not simply according to some inner formula, but we also react to the environment we grow up in. Still, Martha resented Mary's passiveness in terms of housework and her failure to fulfill the traditional expectations of a host. I imagine she was taken aback by the approval Mary received from the visiting rabbi. "Mary has chosen the better part," he said. The words must have stung.

Now, I don't believe this story means to tell us that Mary was a better person than Martha, or that her gifts were more important than Martha's, or that she was more spiritual than Martha. I don't even believe that Jesus says listening is always better than doing or praying is always better than acting. I believe Jesus simply says: "In this very moment, as I visit your home to bring you the gospel, Mary has chosen the better part, listening, absorbing, opening her soul. This is why I am here. Let her be! She can make up for the work another time." ... Let her be! - How often do we force people into certain roles and expectations, even when they are "on to something?" And Mary was on to something. There won't be faith and god-awareness among us unless we learn to pay focused attention to the divine every once in a while. Is that not a message for our times?

In the age of distractibility this short story's message is powerfully relevant. I once went into a home for a pastoral visit and the person I visited had a hard time to get off her I-phone even for five minutes. She was only half present, maybe less, the entire time. Even by today's standards, I was surprised. It was clear that the device had an addictive influence on her, an influence of perpetual distraction. And even though she appreciated my visit, she just couldn't help herself. Of course, I know that some people have ADD or ADHD and general difficulty to focus. But I tend to think that at least a few minutes of focused attention (some people can manage more, some less) whether to God or to another person - is beneficial and wholesome for everyone.

"Mary has chosen the better part." Jesus said that even against Martha's hard charging work ethic as a host, a generally appreciated and accepted behavior at the time. In other words: Martha certainly did nothing wrong. But there are things, our Lord says, which are more important than chores. (Don't tell my kids!) There are more important things than presenting a clean home to visitors or making sure that they have a second or third sandwich. When Neal Armstrong descended on the face of the moon fifty years ago, I doubt people were worried whether their guests had enough to eat. It was that important. Every once in a while, God will ask us to pay undivided, almost careless attention to him. Be ready when you feel that pull and follow the gift of Mary and be drawn deeper into the presence of Christ. **Amen.**