

On Mary, Martha, and Laughing at God

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Genesis 18:1-14
Luke 10: 38-42
St Matthew's Evanston

Sara laughed by the oaks of Mamre,
and the Lord asked Abraham,
"Why did Sara laugh?
Is anything too wonderful, for the Lord?"

Sara laughed. I have always loved that story, I have always heard that laugh, there by the oaks of Mamre. There is a woman who takes God seriously. There is a woman who expects God to pay attention to the practical problems of her life. Pack up my tents and follow you? Sure. But a baby? Are you crazy, God?

Sara, the Jewish mother. I like Sara.

And so I have always wondered. Did Martha laugh at what Jesus says in today's Gospel? I sure would have. I would have hooted. We talked about this passage in the women's spirituality group. And one of the women spoke up for Martha.

"Listen, Jesus," she said. "Don't come traipsing into my house with twelve dirty, hungry disciples, expecting to be fed, and then tell me not to fuss. This is work! And somebody has to do it! If we all just sit at your feet, nobody here will get dinner."

Yeah, I thought. Yeah, right. I bet when Martha finished laughing, I bet that's exactly what Martha said. Scripture, of course, doesn't give Martha a chance to answer. The chapter ends after Jesus speaks. These stories have been transmitted by men, after all.

But other women in the women's group had different reactions. Many felt that Jesus had given Mary extraordinary permission. Jesus gives Mary permission to meet her own spiritual needs, to "sit at the Lord's feet"--even when there is housework to be done. And since there is always work to be done, that permission is a real blessing. And social historians agree: the crux of this story may be Jesus' defending the right of a woman to sit with the men and listen to the Teacher, rather than serving the dinner.

But religious historians point out that Martha is not just busy with the usual "women's work." She is busy with much diakona, the word from which we get deacon--the title Luke's community used as we use the word priest. Luke's point, then, may have to do with tension between administrative duties and presiding at table versus the prayer and study necessary for preaching. Luke dramatizes this tension at the house of Martha and Mary because, well, here are two very famous and important disciples who worked together. In short: when those pink slips pile up, and the gutter repair man didn't come when he was supposed to, and the details of a liturgy need to be worked out, should the priest still take her scheduled day for study and prayer? Yes, says Luke. Study and prayer are "a good or holy part" of Christian ministry, just as important as presiding at the Eucharistic table. Or running the parish in general.

And Mary's part, by the way is not what some translators call "the better part." That's a mistranslation. It is a mistranslation that ignores the Greek in order to express someone's opinion of Martha's ministry. The Greek adjective "agapathe" does not make any comparison. The word means "good" or it means "holy." But "agapathe" it does not mean "better."

After all the sermons I have heard on this text, over the years, I was pleased to discover that the issue here is not who does the dishes. And I certainly had a good time, there in the library, being a scholar again after all these years as a housewife.

But, in fact, the housewife in me still wondered about Martha, about her work, about her wanting some help with her ministry. Fine, let Mary prepare her sermon. But what about Martha? What about her work? You all know me well enough to realize that I will take any excuse I can find to sit and read. But when people are hungry, they need to be fed. When people have outgrown their jeans or worn holes in their soxes, they need to be clothed. When people are tired, some parent or other needs to set aside his or her scholarly reading and make sure that people take their baths and insert their orthodontic appliances and pack up their homework. When people are scared or lonely, they need milk and cookies and someone to listen. No matter how old they are.

So what about that? Doesn't that sound familiar too? Prayer and study are not "the one thing necessary." A one-on-one relationship to God is not the sum total of Christian

discipleship. Prayer and study and relationship to God will inevitably draw us into relationship with other people. And those human connections will in turn enrich and embody our relationship to God. That's what the Incarnation is all about.

So, hey, don't tell me that the "one thing necessary" is to sit here in church. Being here is, yes, "a good and holy thing," but Christian discipleship overflows this place. It grows out of these experiences and entwines itself into every corner of our lives, like those wild morning glories that absolutely cannot be uprooted.

Furthermore, theology itself--especially since WWII--has rediscovered what Martha and centuries of Christian housewives have always known. The sacramental meal of the Eucharist depends very absolutely upon all the other meals we share all week, whether we share them with our families or whether we share them with our friends. And our celebration of the Eucharist together, as this particular community, also depends upon all the meals the kitchen guild has served downstairs, over and over again for the last century.

Those shared meals sustain and transmit the cultural experience upon which the liturgy depends. What's the difference between a cake and a birthday cake, after all? The words we say upon sharing it, words we sometimes even write on top of the cake itself. And if you have never had a birthday cake, you will have real trouble understanding the Eucharist.

On Wednesday nights, at the Mark class, the hostess always sets out an array of desserts--what one woman I know calls "the ministry of chocolate." And in that womanly action, for the nourishment and encouragement of those people gathered for prayer and study, she does more than mirror the sacramental action of the Eucharist that the group celebrates. She extends the sacramental action. She offers, literally, the final "course" of the sacramental meal exactly because she connects the liturgical action with the real, practical life of the community: here, have a brownie and a cup of coffee. We are going to work late tonight.

So yeah, Martha laughs. Long and loud does Martha laugh. But not at Jesus. No, not at Jesus. At long centuries full of commentators who never baked a birthday cake or worked for the kitchen guild or fixed a holiday meal. The Oxford study bible, in fact,

offers a footnote suggesting that the one thing necessary probably refers to a single casserole, some very simple dish, rather than the "many things" that Martha supposedly cooked. As if Jesus had said, "Oh Martha, just open a box of hamburger helper and quit fussing." Oh yeah, I heard Martha laugh at that scholar, by golly.

So what did Jesus mean, by the "one thing necessary"??? As I wondered about that question, there in my basement folding laundry, two things came to mind. First, when Sara laughed, the Lord said, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" And second: Jesus himself had some experience in feeding crowds. Five thousand, was it? Seven thousand? So when Jesus rebukes Martha, was he suggesting something as outlandish as Sara's pregnancy?

Maybe he was rebuking her for making the same mistake that the other apostles had made at the feeding miracles. At those moments, you recall, the apostles suggest dispersing the crowd so that each can go off, each alone, to buy some carry-out. (I know what my mother would say about that, about sending people away hungry.) Or the apostles complain that they do not have the money to cater for such a crowd. (And we know what the ECW would say about that!) And Martha, well, Martha puts on her superwoman cape and hustles right out into her kitchen to try to cook for this mob--all by herself.

So maybe, Martha's complaint to Jesus reflects what Father Johnston has recently called "right-handed power." She wants Jesus to make someone help her. And Jesus refuses.

The Kingdom of God is not about ordering people around. Jesus expects Martha to repeat his call to the community. He expects Martha to call upon the community for help. That is the "one thing" that is necessary: to rely upon the community. To create and to sustain a community that deserves that kind of confidence. She shouldn't expect Jesus to bail her out by ordering another woman into the kitchen. Maybe it's Peter's turn. Maybe James and John need to stand there and grill the fish or bake the bread. Somebody will help. But Martha has got to learn to ask them. The hard part, maybe, is having the courage and the humility and the confidence to ask for that help.

Gee whiz. Maybe it would be easier to do the dishes alone.

But as the Lord comments to Abraham, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

And the very name of Martha, in Aramaic, means "lady" or "mistress." It is the feminine equivalent of "lord." Since Martha is presiding at table, she had better learn the basic rule of table-fellowship: everybody shares. Everybody shares all of it, from dicing the onions to cleaning up afterwards. And that is, after all, even today the ministry of the Martha's Guild: we do things like bake cookies for baptisms and for funerals. We bring meals into households where there is "any kind of trouble." Martha's Guild is the people whom other folks trust for practical help when they need it, whether that means food, or a ride to doctor's office. The Martha's Guild women embody, in one very homey and down-to-earth way, what it means to love one another.

I remember, when my mom was sick when I was little, Mrs. Flanagan brought in the best chicken soup I have ever had. And I thought, by golly, maybe it's worth going to church after all: look at that soup! I was twenty years figuring out how to make soup like that. Or, recently, one of my own kids brought to me an enormous ziplock bag of oatmeal cookies and said, awestruck. "Mommy look. Some lady came. She just said she's from church and look what she gave us!" Or another churchwoman, with a pan of lasagna that my family proclaimed the best lasagna that the world had ever known. Yep, I thought. I know this taste. It's called love.

The Martha's Guild tradition probably goes back almost a thousand years. Medieval legend had it that Martha, Mary, and Lazarus sailed to southern France, where Martha tamed a dragon who lived in the Rhone River. The dragon had been sinking ships and killing people; she tamed it, used her belt for a leash, and led this ancient mythic symbol of feminine power and authority into the city itself. The Martha cult was never as widespread as the cult of the Virgin Mary, but it was quite substantial, especially in France, southern Germany, and northern Italy.

In Martha's name, people established hospitals and convents devoted to very practical ministry to the poor and the sick and the hungry. These Martha groups also advocated church reform. One very important group in Italy went so far as to advocate both translating the Bible and celebrating the Eucharist in the language of the people. The

Martha ministries did not fare too well in the Inquisition: surviving minutes of Inquisition hearings use "Martha" as a code term for "heresy."

So. The Martha-Mary story is clearly not about who does housework. It is about the use of authority or the nature of leadership. Jesus calls upon Martha to do what Jesus himself did, in feeding the five thousand: to look to other people for help, to use the force of her personal authority not to order folks around but to give them confidence enough to share what they have, whether that's the lunch they packed or their ability to chop onions or wash dishes. That's the miracle. That's what the Lord said about Sara: nothing is too wonderful for the Lord to do. And to do so through us, after all: the angel of the Lord did not carry that baby. Sara carried the baby.

The dragon here that needs to be tamed, perhaps, is this myth of rugged, self-sufficient individualism. In men, we call it "machismo"; in women, we call it "martyrdom." Either way, I think, it sinks a lot of ships.

What would happen if we dared to tame that dragon. What if, at work and at home, what if we dared to turn to others and say, "I need your help on this one. I can't cope with this alone." We complain to each other over and over again about being stressed out, about working "the second shift," about wearing too many hats too much of the time. What if we tried answering Jesus' challenge. When we are faced with our own versions of "the Five Thousand"--or even the Twelve, dirty and hungry and on our doorstep--what if we all hung up our "super-person" capes? We need to give up the illusion that the only way to be safe and to be secure is to be solitary, and independent, and self-contained. Illusions like that just open the door to agony. To anger, to the anger that centuries of women have imagined for Martha, to anger that leads to depression.

So I suggest that we might indeed force some incredible changes, in that slow, left-handed, womanly way, if over and over again we acknowledged that we are all interdependent--one family living on one planet, one body of the Risen Christ.

Scripture tells us that Sara laughed at the Lord. But "at the set time" and "in due season," Sara gave birth to a blessing for her people. They called the baby "Isaac"--which can be translated both as "she laughed" or as "he laughed."

Because, of course, when you laugh at the Lord, when you laugh at Jesus, the Lord laughs back. And then, who knows what will follow.