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Christ Church Winnetka
Sunday July 17, 2016
Year C, Proper 11
Luke 10:38-42

Sibling Rivalry.

Sibling rivalry is what we tend to assume this story of Mary and Martha is all about.

There's a Flemish Baroque painting of the scene
That just about says it all.
It shows Martha, with her skirt and aprons hiked up around her ankles.
A goat follows close behind her.
Martha is gesturing in objection to Jesus,
While Mary sits placidly at the Rabbi's feet,
and a kitten naps on the folds of her skirt.

In many artists'--And many preachers'--rendering of this story,
Mary appears confident and calm in her attentiveness to Jesus' word;
while *Martha* appears anxious and harrowed
As she tends to her many household tasks.

In most depictions, Jesus smiles approvingly at Mary the Contemplative,
But regards Martha the Hostess with some mix of disappointment and condescension.

“Martha, Martha! Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her!”

Mary 1. Martha 0. Sibling Rivalry.

Now perhaps, if we take just these 5 scripture verses in isolation,
this sort of reading can be defended.

But if we look at the larger context of Luke's gospel,
and where this story falls within it,
It's hard to uphold such an account of things.

Immediately prior to these verses,
Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan,
which concludes with the command to “Go and DO likewise.”

And just before that, we saw Jesus sending 70 disciples
to places where he says, “the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.”

In those stories, and really throughout Luke's gospel,

Jesus is all about the need to put hand to the plow
and get busy tending to the needs of others.

So it would seem strange and out of character for Jesus
to suddenly start trivializing Martha's life of service,
while praising Mary's more contemplative path.

Not only would it be out of character,
But it also would not be very strategic,
Given where Jesus is on his journey.

A chapter or so ago in Luke's gospel,
Jesus set his face to Jerusalem,
And declared that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Jesus is homeless. He is hungry.
And he is on his way to Jerusalem,
where he will be abandoned, betrayed, and denied
by even his closest friends.

And it is Martha--not Mary, but Martha--that today's story tells us
insisted that Jesus come into her home
and enjoy some rest and a good meal.

It is hard to imagine this hungry, itinerant Jesus
simply writing off the extravagant hospitality of Martha.
Jesus needs Martha.

So maybe this story isn't as simple as Jesus rejecting Martha's lifestyle in favor of Mary's.

And yet, it seems pretty clear that Jesus thinks Martha is missing something important--
Something essential that Mary has figured out.

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Perhaps it's clear by now that I don't think this is a story of sibling rivalry.
I prefer to think of it instead as a story of *sibling collaboration*.

I think that Martha and Mary embody two aspects
of the incarnational hospitality Jesus urges his followers to engage in.
And we can learn a lot from the sisters' example
about the "mission work" we do--
the kinds of good works we do in Christ's name today.

*True Christian hospitality requires both Martha's willing hands,
And **also** Mary's open heart.*

So when Jesus indicates that Martha is missing something,
He is not critiquing her commitment to hosting him well--
To feeding and giving rest to the tired rabbi.

What he's challenging is her tendency to move through life so fast
That she misses the opportunity *to be changed* by her encounter with him.

Martha has invited God into her house,
But it's Mary who shows the willingness to be transformed by his presence there.

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One thing that's always frustrated me about this gospel story
Is that we never learn what it is Jesus is talking about,
To Mary and whoever else was sitting at his feet.
Is he telling her about his day?
Is he holding forth on some scripture passage they read in synagogue that week?
Perhaps he was offering a challenging, prophetic word
like we heard from Amos this morning;
Or maybe he was speaking healing and hope to a troubled crowd.

We don't know what he was saying...
And I think part of the point of the story
is that *neither did Mary* when she sat down at his feet.
She placed herself in a posture of openness
to the one who had stumbled into her home--
The one her sister had dragged in off the street.

We don't know what Jesus was saying...
And we also don't know what else
Mary might have had on her agenda for the day.

Perhaps she had been planning a day of household chores herself.
Maybe while Martha cooked, Mary was going to do the laundry, or pay the bills.
We don't know.

What we do know is that when Jesus showed up under her roof,
She rearranged her to-do list so she could sit at his feet and take in whatever he had to share that
day.

She reorganized her day to prioritize a listening encounter with the stranger before her.
Perhaps she suspected he had something vital to teach her about God...
or about faith...or maybe about herself.

While Martha busied herself in the role of Host,

Mary made herself the Guest at Jesus' impromptu teach-in in her home.

In the Greek language that much of the New Testament was written in,
There's a SINGLE word that is used
In various places to describe all three of these roles--of stranger, host, and guest.

It's the term that Jesus uses in Matthew's gospel when he says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

The apostle Paul uses the same word to describe the hospitality he receives in his many travels...
Elsewhere, Paul uses it to describe the transformation that happens to us in baptism,
from being strangers to being citizens in God's household.

"Stranger...Host...and Guest"--ONE word.

The Greek points to the mutuality, and openness to transformation, that are at the heart of true Christian hospitality.

Sister Ana Maria Pineda--A Latina theologian and an immigrant to the U.S--
writes that "no one is strange except in relation to someone else;
[She says,] we *make* one another guests and hosts by how we treat [each other]."

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Martha and Mary both saw in Jesus someone who was a stranger to them.
Martha invited him in as guest, and sought to meet his needs.
Mary invited him to be her host, and share his gifts and experience with her.

The hospitality that Jesus calls us to practice requires us to move frequently and in mutuality among those roles of stranger, host, and guest...

And who better than Jesus to teach us about it?

For It is the kind of hospitality that God ultimately practiced
in becoming human and dwelling among us.
A stranger to most; a guest in many homes; and host to a great many more—
including us!--at his Welcome Table.

* * *

And so perhaps when Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better path,
He doesn't mean the more important one.
Both paths are important.
But Mary's is the one that is often harder—the one that involves greater *risk* and *vulnerability*.

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As we worship here this morning, 16 of our youth and 6 chaperones are boarding a plane to Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

They'll drive some 3 hours from Sioux Falls to a Native American youth camp where they'll spend the week living as stranger, host, and guest alongside local Lakota teenagers and elders.

They are going to serve; and *also* to sit at the feet of their hosts and learn.

They go with an openness to being shaped and changed by the relationships they will forge and the stories they will hear.

They go as Martha, AND as Mary.

And I hope--I pray--that they will come back here next week with something to teach us about what it can look like, in our day and time, to embody this robust, and life-giving, hospitality that Jesus calls us to.

I hope and I pray that they will come back to us

With tangible stories of that baptismal promise we all make:

“To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

But I suspect that they will come back *also* with a clearer sense of what we mean when we pray That “all who are baptized into [Christ’s death] May live in the power of his resurrection.”

Because to live in the power of the resurrection means that we strive to celebrate all the ways that God works through our encounters with those who are different from us to make all things new.

They will come back bearing the very Good News

That God does not *threaten* to make all things new--

But rather, that God *promises* to make all things new--including us!

They will come back having served Christ, as Martha did;

And having sat at his feet like Mary.

And they will come home *changed*,

because they have been heeding God’s call and following God’s example to live as stranger, host, and guest in this world.