

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
Luke 10:38-42

July 18, 2010

Martha and Mary

Many people are familiar with the 1965 rock and roll hit called Turn Turn Turn by the American music group known as the Byrds. It was a number one song on the billboards for a while. Some people are less familiar with the fact that the words are taken almost entirely from the third chapter from Ecclesiastes chapter 3. Pete Seeger who wrote the song even jokes that he really only wrote six words; the rest comes from the Bible. Like much of the wisdom that comes from the pages of Ecclesiastes, the sage who penned these words is someone who is seeking and proclaiming balance in life. The purpose of a faithful person is to discern the right time to do the things that God wants us to. Sometimes God wants us to plant and sometimes God wants us to pluck up what is planted. Sometimes the right thing to do is mourn and sometimes the right thing to do is dance and celebrate. Sometimes we embrace and sometimes we refrain from embracing. All the time the clock turns and turns and everything has its time.

About every three years in the life of this church called Ark and Dove the clock turns toward a process called long range planning. As much as and as rapidly the world and communities change in this

21st century, it makes sense to make a plan every three years. The way we have set things up in our new structure, the clerk of Session is also the chairperson of the Long Range Planning Team. The purpose of long range planning process is to honestly evaluate our current quality of mission and ministry and to discern where God might be leading us in the next three years. I am perplexed that there are many churches which minister decade after decade, they turn, turn, turn without ever engaging in long range planning. So this year, Rich Speir our Clerk of Session, the Session and Deacons of our church and a Long Range Planning Team of four others has been engaged in evaluation and dreaming since January. There have been several opportunities for congregational involvement and there will be several more.

One of the things I have heard many members of our church voicing during this turn, is the need for our congregation to focus on the ministry of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation could be defined as the act of intentionally nurturing our relationship with God so that our faith grows and our spiritual horizons widen. Spiritual formation is the process by which we open ourselves to the shaping of the Holy Spirit so that in our lives we become more Christ like; the

process by which we become more and more grounded in the image of God. We have heard this desire voiced in several forums and I think what we are recording is that there are some unfulfilled yearnings.

Now on the one hand you could say Dah, church/spiritual formation – don't they go together? Aren't they inseparable? What else would a church be doing? On the other hand, a lot of the things with which we busy ourselves in the church may not nurture our faith at all. There are days when church work is frustrating and even discouraging. Certainly a lot of people not in the church look at the church and religion in general as a structure or a construct that often stands apart from and even hinders spirituality. We have all heard this critique. We have all heard people say, "I am spiritual but I am not religious." "I believe in God, But I am not into organized religion."

I think we see a short example of this discussion taking place on the pages of the Gospel of Luke this morning. This whole Martha Mary dichotomy raises interesting issues about church work and mission verses spiritual formation. There is a time for every matter under heaven and Martha uses her time to engage in the sacred act

of organized hospitality while Mary engages in the intriguing act of personal spiritual formation.

Martha is all a flutter. Jesus her Lord has literally come calling. He is in the living room and she is knocking her self out trying to get a decent meal together for a man she greatly admires. Meanwhile her sister Mary sits with Jesus, her feet up and not a worry in her head while Martha did all the chores. In fact, according to Luke, Martha was in a bit of frenzy, running to and fro, making sure everything was ready for Jesus and the who knows how many friends who might show up for dinner. The guy was wildly popular, he broke bread with just about anyone and he had 12 loyal students that usually accompanied him on his pilgrimages. So Martha is sweating bricks, tending to duty and Mary all comfy on the pillows at Jesus' feet. That doesn't necessarily mean she was literally sitting at Jesus feet. It means she was showing Jesus honor and paying attention and learning. It means she was discovering the wonders of God and the joys of faith. It also means Mary was engaging in spiritual formation. Martha, inattentive to the deep words in the family room, finally butts in and complains to Jesus about immobile Mary whose butt is parked in neutral. In what seems like a complete lack of sympathy, Jesus

tells Martha the worker that Mary the shirker¹ has chosen the better part. Poor Martha, gets shut right down.

Since Mary is doing the “work” of a male disciple, learning at Jesus feet, and Martha is doing the traditional work of a first century woman; some butter brain biblical dunderheads have actually used this passage to put down women and demean housework. To that conclusion I remind us all that the baggage we bring usually effects the conclusions at which we arrive. Other folks with no sexism in mind, have been led down the path of attacking Martha for being overly concerned about the chores or for being an obsessive type who wants to make sure that everyone works as hard as she does. Some people argue that life of contemplation and discernment chosen by Mary for the day, is being held up by Jesus as preferable to the life of action. Monks who spend most of their day in prayer often land in this place. I have heard some great discussions about this day in the home of Martha, but for the moment Mary gets the slam dunk and the score is Mary 1, Martha 0.

If we were keeping score in this family feud, we might want to give Mary a thumbs up for her come from behind victory, but the fact

¹ Homiletics July 2007 page 31

of the matter is, men or women, we tend to honor Martha in our day to day lives. Martha is distracted by her work and unable to focus on the living God in the living room right next to her. Have you ever been to a meal at someone's home where the host's concern that everything be "perfect" ruined the whole evening? There comes a time in every good party when you just have to let the dishes stack up, the coffee get cold and the butter melt, so that everyone may simply sit down and talk around the table. And the uncomfortable truth is that there is a Martha inside of us all. Somehow life and times conspire and our focus is drawn away from God. We find ourselves distracted by our many obligations and faith falls far behind. You know we Christians are so busy with life and so elsewhere engrossed that on a given Sunday morning in the United States, less than 20% of us are in church worshipping. 80% of us are otherwise occupied. Here is the weird part, we who are involved in church with the purpose of building our faith and getting close to God, sometimes get so consumed by mission and ministry, we almost forget about God.

Sometimes like Martha, we move beyond distracted, we find ourselves stressed out about the inconsequential. Sometimes like Martha, we obsess on the miniscule and inflate the insignificant. In

our flurry of preoccupation we miss the obvious, the wonderful and the awesome. We miss the gift of life and faith that Jesus lays before us.

Martha the worker however is not dissed by Jesus for doing chores. She is encouraged by Jesus to keep her priorities straight. Martha who is described as the owner of the home extends gracious hospitality to Jesus. The word used to describe all her preparations is in fact the same Greek word from which we get the word deacons diakoni. Martha is “deaconing” if you will with a generous giving spirit so that Jesus is extended kindness. Jesus is not critiquing her actions or her hospitality; he is critiquing her anxiety and pointing out that her fretfulness is interfering with her faith. Her perspiration is short changing her inspiration.

Mary the shirker, with her derriere on the pillow, actually extends an even deeper form of hospitality to Jesus. Mary gives her guest her complete attention, even though her sister fusses. Mary gives Jesus her heart. Each of us needs to find time in our lives for contemplation for prayerful quiet thought about faith, about God and about the ways our lives intersect and fail to intersect with the Holy. It’s great when you grab this time in the shower or while commuting

to work for God is always around us, but it may be more profitable if you set aside 15 minutes a day to read a short passage of scripture and really listen for God before you send off your lists of prayers.

When I hear people in the church saying that we need to focus more on spiritual formation what I hear is a yearning for balance in church life. All these things we do for the church, well most of them anyway, are pretty important tasks. Whether we are a Sunday School teacher, a Habitat volunteer or an offering counter we are engaging in ministry out of a sense of answering God's call. I guess the key is to remember why we undertake tasks in ministry. We want to feel that we are turning our time with God not spinning our wheels. Activism or mission or church work without contemplation can end in an aimless repetitive doing. The purpose of long range planning is to disrupt that pattern. What are we doing that we should be doing differently? Are we doing things we should give up? What tasks and ministries are going unattended? We can also dream and stretch and think about possibilities.

When I hear people in the church saying that we need to focus more on spiritual formation, what I hear is a yearning for balance. They are hoping that the church can help them find ways of being

formed by the Holy Spirit into God's image even while they engage in a break neck pace of living. I don't think God is any less present out there than in here. We need to teach each other how to stay connected with God the 167 hours a week we are not in worship. And I do think they call it "break neck" for a reason. Prayer and contemplation help us to evaluate whether we are truly answering God's call with our everyday living.

Like wise those that sit and meditate and contemplate have to ask themselves whether they ever put any of their best intentions and careful deliberations into motion. Although in this story, Jesus lauds Mary; there are many places in the Gospels where Jesus calls his disciples into action. Some people can talk and think things to death. Life turns and turns and turns and after a while it becomes clear that all this talking is an excuse for failing to become involved. A faith in stasis is a stagnant faith indeed. Faith and action, Martha and Mary, contemplation and mission; these together make a balanced disciple and a balanced church.

Martha "deaconed" Jesus and Jesus would deacon us. Jesus is extending to us now the hospitality of his table where there is a

place set for you. Contemplate, meditate and be nurtured so that you are strengthened for your life of discipleship.

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