

Distractions:

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Luke 10:38-42

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Genesis 18 The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.³ He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant."⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes."⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent."¹⁰ Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Luke 10:38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

I looked at the juxtaposition of these readings and I knew that they should mean something to me, but they did not. My reflections upon it left me mystified as to why the Mary and Martha story was linked to the annunciation story in Genesis? The presenting question is: what could Mary and Martha have in common with Sarah being told that she was going to bear a child—at her age? So I had to do some reading and research. The point that mystified me, until I read a few articles, might be clear to you. These two lessons speak to the centrality of women in the ministry of the church. I will talk briefly about this before moving on to the Mary and Martha story in particular.

This is easiest to see with the Sarah narrative. Earlier in Genesis, Abraham has been told that he will be the father of a great nation. He is also told that Sarah will be the mother of a great nation. Immediately there is a problem. Sarah is barren; she cannot conceive. The story of how Abraham tries to get around this dominates chapters 12 through 17 of Genesis. The quick and dirty summary is that Abraham is convinced that God has made a mistake and did not really mean that Sarah was to be the mother of a great people. In his mind, it is enough that he will be the father of a great nation, and the mother is not really important. God disagrees and in this chapter Abraham and Sarah are told that finally, when they are both very old, Sarah will have a child. She laughs. She conceives. Isaac is born. God has waited so long to make it clear that Isaac is the child of the promise and exists only because of God.

With this point in mind, it is clear that without Sarah, Israel would not happen. Abraham was less important. He had children with Hagar and Keturah and they were not the progeny God had in mind. Only the son of Sarah is the son of the promise. She is more important than Abraham.

Now to turn to the gospel and to the centrality of women in it: We have what seems to be a simple domestic scene with Martha attending to the chores and Mary avoiding them by monopolizing the guest. If that is the whole of the setting of this gospel reading then Jesus is saying to the women that listening to him is more important than attending to household chores. Who could argue with this? If you have an opportunity to listen to Jesus then who has time to stay in the kitchen? This interpretation has been used to show how “women’s work” is less important than the Lord’s work—whatever that is.

But an examination of the texts at hand point to a different interpretation. What if Martha and Mary are, like many other characters in this part of Luke, ministers who share a ministry in common? What if they are leaders of a local congregation? Remember that Luke is writing to his community, he is not recording a history of Jesus. Luke is concerned with the events of the historical Jesus only when they illuminate issues that are alive in his community. What if the issue in his community is a question of leadership, between two women who share it? We can imagine that Luke has access to this tradition of Jesus visiting his two friends, and commenting on something, but when the story gets to Luke’s hands, and we only have available to us the story as it exists in Luke’s hands, Luke uses it to comment on something happening to a congregation he knows.

Luke does not represent Martha’s and Mary’s leadership as radical; that they are women is not a problem. They simply are the leaders of this congregation. The controversy is over the way they are exercising leadership and Martha has gotten

herself bogged down in the day-to-day tedium of running a group. She has lost sight of why she is doing this and what it might mean to her. Mary has remained focused on the Word and is still in touch with why the congregation is gathered together.

That is it exists to hear the Word of God and to do it. It does not exist simply to exist.

The lectionary says that the ministry of women is central to the proclamation of the gospel and it says this by juxtaposing the story of the annunciation to Sarah with the story of Martha and Mary. The gospel lesson assumes that the ministry of women is accepted and ordinary.

Let me state clearly my relationship to Christ Church I have no experience with your life other than the 3 weeks I was with you last summer, the 2 evenings in Lent and the 4 weeks I'm with you this summer. Nothing I am about to say is based on any issue that I know about in your congregation. My comments are reflective of my experience and I'm not trying to say anything about you or your clergy. As you will hear in a few paragraphs, I am saying something about a very present reality in my home congregation in Westport.

One of the things which discourages clergy the most is the amount of time the clergy must spend as Martha spent time, that is *But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."* That is the priest becomes distracted by her many tasks and upset that the priest alone is doing the work.

When I first retired I spent a week each summer at Sewanee. The first year I was there I attended a lecture on the Emerging/Emergent Church. Tony Jones, a leader in this movement, spoke to us about the importance of a non hierarchical church in which the ministry is shared, and even the preaching is shared, with everyone. It threatened some of the people attending and they challenged him in the question and answer time. He was clear that the institutional church was, as he observed, spending too much time in committee work and too little preaching the gospel. I think he is correct and I made myself unpopular with the other folks in the lecture by saying so. Of course I'm retired and I've been non parochial since 1987, so I haven't had responsibility for running a congregation in a long time.

What does the gospel say? Jesus is talking about a partnership. Martha and Mary are working together. Jesus knows that what Martha does is important, but he admonishes her not to lose touch with the reason why she is in the congregation. Unless she stays in touch with the faith that drew her to Christ in the 1st place, she has no chance of staying faithful in the last place.

I know this because I have been there. I can remember long periods in my parish ministry when Jesus Christ seemed awfully distant and awfully quiet. So I filled the distance with activity and the quiet with my voice. The congregation demanded and expected leadership and certainty and I can supply leadership and certainty in abundance. But I cannot supply leadership and certainty in infinite abundance and my loss of faith became apparent to me and ultimately to them.

Clergy burn out all of the time, and I burnt out and remained burnt out for several years. We burn out because like Martha we become distracted. It is the burden of the congregation to demand of the clergy that they not be so distracted by the demands of leadership that they lose sight of the peculiar community they have been ordained to lead. We need to inquire of our clergy about their prayer life? We

need to ask them what feeds them? We need to be certain that they take days off, take vacation, and take care of themselves. We need to ask of them how, like Mary, they're hearing the Word? Unfortunately, too many of us, the clergy, have the urge to climb up on the cross and be crucified instead of the risen Lord who seems to remain distant. We do this because we forget that we are connected with you. We do that because you let us forget that we are connected with you. We do that because the rewards of devoting one's entire life to the church are tangible and immediate while the rewards of devoting one's life to prayer are less tangible, harder to define and anything but immediate.

Earlier this month the rector of Christ & Holy Trinity in Westport announced her resignation. She became rector only 3 years ago. She will become a chaplain at an Episcopal Day School in Richmond, VA. She gave as her reason for resigning the inability to meet the demands of the congregation and her desire to be present to her husband and two young daughters. She could not balance her work and home lives. I know that the demands on her to lead a prayerful, spiritual life were not burdensome. It was the demands on her to lead a growing, meaningful, healthy organization that burdened her. We are losing a talented priest because the busyness of her job overwhelmed the listening to Jesus part of her job. It is our role as members of congregations to remember that the priest is first and foremost a spiritual leader not a CEO. If we don't then what in heaven's name are we here for?

This lesson on one important level calls us to recognize the centrality of women, especially ordained women. But on another level it calls us to recognize that we are organized around the Word of God, and if we lose that we cease to be the church and all we are about is doing chores.