

Proper 11 Year C 2014

Since the Enlightenment, the individual, the autonomous self, a term coined by Hegel, has become more valuable than community. It is the individual that strives toward a not too distant perfection. It is the individual that seeks to get it right, the individual with an advanced brain, subduing nature and each other for the sake of self. It is the individual who will set things right. Why else would super heroes in comic books and movies, cowboys of the old west, so captivate our modern imaginations? If one could accomplish this one thing, this getting it right, then happiness, success, joy, love, wealth, and last but not least...power... would be ours, and ours alone...I would submit that ironically modern nations are vast projections of the autonomous self...self interest being the modus operandi of nations, as well as the individual.

Hand in hand with this brash individualism, or at least connected to it, is our obsession with the black and the white, the cut and the dried. Something either is or it isn't. There is no room for the gray, the messy middle. One must choose. One must decide between the dark and the light, who's good, who's bad. Polarity abounds. It plagues our political system now more than ever. In our digital world there is only room for certainty, and that certainty is ours (mine) alone. In our world there is less and less room for meaningful discourse...discourse that represents an excursion into the gray, an excursion into real conversation, into the world of possibilities, into the world of the imagination, into the world of mystery and intimacy. No, we live in a culture of hard facts and figures; and the facts and figures have to, at all costs, be... *right*.

Most interpretations (the vast majority) of today's Gospel text are, in my opinion, corrupted by this modern ethos. These interpretations go something like this: Martha and Mary welcome Jesus into Martha's house. Martha gets busy with the work of the house and gets distracted by her duties, while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, and listens dutifully to what Jesus has to say. Jesus rebukes Martha for being distracted and commends Mary for her kind attention to him. The footnote in the Oxford English Bible puts it thus: "With delicate ambiguity Jesus rebuked Martha's choice of values; Jesus approved Mary's preference for listening to his teaching as

contrasted with Martha's unneeded acts of hospitality." We are compelled to choose between the one and the other, between who's got it right and who's got it wrong. And further, Mary and Martha in this interpretation are reduced to domestic servants confined to serving the men of the house. And when, with all due respect to the Oxford scholars, when has hospitality ever been unneeded?

I want to offer a different and I believe more accurate picture. One of the key issues in the book of Luke, as it is a key issue in all the gospels, is to teach its community of believers how to live, how to serve the needs of the other in the faith, how to bear salvation, i.e. dignity and well being to the world, how to live selflessly. We are lulled into thinking that this is a sweet, domestic scene only, but there are clues that there is much more here, much more here that would fit with the context of the book of Luke as a whole...that is, how do we live as vocational community in the faith of Jesus the anointed of God?

Our translation states that, "Martha was distracted by her many tasks", but the Greek serves us well here...the Greek word for task or work here is *diakonos*, which in the context of Luke's agenda means *ministry*. It's the word from which we get deacon. Well that is quite a difference, especially when one reads in Luke and Acts that ministry, *diakonos*, involves teaching and preaching, visiting and healing. One who does *diakonos*, is one who is, as the Lutheran theologian Warren Carter puts it, a go-between for God.

Moreover, those who are in ministry never do it alone...never alone. Jesus sends out the seventy, two by two, to do the work he intends. Paul and Barnabas are prime examples. In our passage today Mary and Martha are called sisters, which could mean siblings, but in the context of the tenth chapter of Luke, it quite possibly alludes to sisters in Christ, partners in the faith...two women in partnership for the spread of the Gospel. Women ministers...imagine that!

Well I think Luke has something important to say to us in our own time: We don't choose Mary or Martha. We need them both. In fact they are a composite figure; they are the example like the many women protagonists in Luke that show us the way to true life. We need them both to teach us how to be good and faithful ministers. Martha has done exactly what Jesus has asked her and all his followers to do...to give and receive hospitality in myriad forms...to feed, to clothe, to visit, to preach, to do justice...to minister. Here we see Martha who is worn out, anxious and distracted, not from cooking

and cleaning, but from ...much Ministry, to properly translate the Greek. To do God's work is to spend oneself... and it is costly to be sure. Many people of faith are compassionate Marthas who would work themselves to distraction for God's greater good. Here we see a compassionate Jesus bidding Martha not to forget the *Mary* side of ministry, the side that listens, the side that hears and sees the living word of God, forever speaking itself anew; the spoken word the teaching word, inspiring us, revitalizing us beyond our anxieties and distractions. The Mary side of faith stops for nurture... word and sacrament instruments thereof as well.

This is the "better part" that would bid us listen, not just to God, but to each other. I believe God is drawn to us by our passionate and compassionate conversation. God can't resist ingenuous conversation. In our being open, in our listening we invite conversation that would take us by the hand into the world of the gray, into life's messiness where we belong, into the world of possibility, into the imaginative enterprise of proclaiming the kingdom anew.

All of us, the baptized are go-betweens of the Gospel, go-betweens of heralding God's coming commonweal. We claim each newly baptized as one of us because we know that he or she can't do it alone, as we know we can't do it alone. Let us take to heart Luke's words of encouragement in our own ministry. It is not about getting it right. It is about paying attention to the source, and acting on the encounter of the source. Or perhaps it is acting for the Good and encountering God there. Or more probably it is both. Blessed is our doing, the Martha side of us, and blessed also is our encounter with God and our encounter with each other, our encounter with the truth, the Mary side of us. The one needful thing is that the *two* are essential... not either or, not black or white...but a sacred gray from which the green shoots of resurrection break forth; a sacred gray that calls us into the messiness, and the mysterious richness of the life of faith. And know, dear people of God, we will never have to live that life alone.