

“Martha” a first-person monologue by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Maundy Thursday, 2006 Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church

Text: Luke 10:38-41

“Mary Mary Quite Contrary...” I wish we had had this nursery rhyme when I was a child! Mary was always the favorite, pretty and curly haired. When we were young, she was allowed to play while I was taught to cook. She was allowed to sew our clothes, while I was the one who washed them. She was always lingering places, day dreaming, wondering aloud, talking about clouds and people and ideas.

Don't think I did not love my sister. We all did, who could not. She and my brother and I were always so close. But that Mary could be exasperating! a darned nuisance sometimes!

A good example is the scripture you heard today. We had met Jesus as children – we are distantly related and when the families gathered at Passover, they often camped out near our house in Bethany. There was something special about him even then. We played together, he always gave you his total attention – he made me feel special even then. And he was mischievous and funny. But there was always an awe, an other-worldly quality, like he was always thinking ahead.

Actually he was very much like my sister Mary – wonderful, but sometimes annoying!

As we grew to adults, Mary and I had our marriages and were both early widowed. Neither of us had children. We came back to our childhood home to care for Lazarus, who lost two wives in childbirth and never got interested in another. So we kept his home which was also our home. Actually Lazarus was a great and learned man in the area. He had been ordained a Pharisee in the local synagogue, but he shunned the legalistic maneuverings of his colleagues, and spent time with the people. Lazarus and Jesus had studied as children at the feet of some of our greatest rabbis, and had remained close friends. Jesus was like our brother.

Now when his fame began to spread, and he began to wander the countryside, preaching and teaching and healing – loving and encouraging the people – we provided a haven for him, a sort of home. He never could go back to his mother's home, his notoriety was too great and Mary had her hands full with other children since the death of Joseph.

This particular visit, we had only three hours warning. Usually I knew a day ahead. And I also realized that his band had grown. There could be as few as 15 or as many as 100! There was Jesus himself, plus the 12 disciples, plus the 70 whom Jesus sent out and who had recently returned to him, plus others who might be tagging along. In a land of nomads and wilderness, our hospitality code contained definite expectations, from ritual greeting with a kiss, to water and ointments for washing, to the presentation of a large meal. Indeed, a hearty meal could spell the difference between life and death for desert travelers.

I was frantic! The morning long there had been a bustle of excitement ... sweeping, scrubbing,

dusting, checking recipes, darting in and out of the kitchen... frantically preparing the food and putting the place in order --Every moment was precious. So many details to cover. Then, Jesus arrived... and suddenly Mary whisked in to take over as hostess. She welcomed Jesus. She settled the large group around tables, all in the courtyard; and then plopped herself down In front of the Rabbi.

Whoa. Wait a minute! I was left to do all the work! Can you imagine? Of course you can – you are church workers! I suspect you, like me, often get caught in the frenzy of the project. Why doesn't someone else help? Why doesn't someone at least notice!

I couldn't help it, I began to harbor anger, then mutter to myself, then actively agitate with indignation, resentment, envy ... I got more and more aggravated, more and more frustrated... until I blurted it out: “ Where is Mary? Why isn't she in here helping me? Look at this Lord. I'm having to do all the work here. Don't you care that my sister Mary has left me to serve alone? You get on to her now. Tell her to get out here in the kitchen and help me!” But Jesus said, more gently than I appreciated, more unsympathetic than I wanted: “Martha, Martha, don't be so worried and troubled about so many things. Relax. Lighten up. One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken from her.”

Yahweh have mercy, I was stunned. All my work -- anything less would be unacceptable. WHAT was Jesus saying?

In retrospect, I realize that my question was , in fact, one of envy – something like, "Lord am I not the righteous one in our family, the really lovable and admirable one? Look how hard I'm working!” And Jesus' answer was something like, “ No, you are no more or less righteous than your sister. You are human, needing love, seeking meaning – But you are trying to earn something that is freely given. Your sister has for the moment stopped such nonsense, so should you.”

I was trying too hard. Mary knew instinctively that the good news, that which cannot be taken away, was sitting right in the room with her. . . just as the good news for us exists right here in this room. Jesus did not reject my cooking and serving. Goodness knows he appreciated that goat stew – he did not complain about the plentiful wine. Nor did he reject the new coat I made him! He simply reminded me that service without understanding, service without joy, is empty frenzy.

It is about only one thing -- and how that one thing leads to transformation. I was so busy being caught in my role that I did not see the truth in front of me. Jesus came to our home to do a new thing! That particular night, the new thing, the radical breakthrough, was allowing Mary to sit at the feet of Jesus. Truth to tell, it was unthinkable, in that era, for a woman to be admitted to what we would call a theological discussion. But Jesus was about overturning customs; Mary was welcomed. I would have been as well.

For me, the truth has not yet dawned. Caught up in the furor of serving, I lost the object of the activity. The gift of hospitality had become an obligation, an urgency to prove myself. Instead of a bridge, a joyful response, the meal had become a wedge between myself and my Lord. He was saying, “I, Jesus, only need one thing. The simplest affair. I need what most all of you have

already given me – what Mary has given me-- just your devotion and love.”

It finally dawned on me that Jesus was speaking not of our needs, mine or Mary’s -- Jesus was talking about what he needed. He had no intention for us to put service over against devotion or to put faith against works, or contemplation against actions. He simply meant, slow down, remember the wellsprings of your courage and hope. Even The Genesis creation narrative tells us that God created the world, and all that is in it, in six short days, a remarkable burst of energy even for God. And then, God was tired - "... on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done and he rested on the seventh day from all his work.” Jesus did not mind extravagance. Love is always extravagant. I was extravagant in my preparations that day, very special day. Jesus was extravagant when, weeks later, he woke our dear Lazarus from the dead. And Mary showed her extravagance a few days before Passover, as Jesus reclined at table at our home and Mary poured a flask of expensive perfume over Jesus' feet. Mary was criticized for wasting what might have been sold to raise money for the poor, but Jesus spoke on her behalf.

This Gospel is not about a choice between Mary and Martha. If we were to ask Jesus which of the two things we need more of, Mary’s reflective ness or my activism, he would probably say YES.

I thought that I was doing the serving that evening, and that Jesus was being served. I thought that I was the host and Jesus was the guest. Not so. Later on in Luke’s Gospel there is another meal where the people there might have had the same misunderstanding. At the last supper, Jesus sent out his disciples to prepare the room, buy the food, and cook the meal. When everything was ready, he sat down and said, “I am among you as one who serves.” The table waits. Jesus is waiting to serve us.