

The Truth is – They are Different

Introduction

Our reading today is from the Gospel of Luke. It is important to remember whenever we read scripture in general – and when we are reading from one of the four gospels – those books of the Bibles that tell the stories of Jesus – in particular – that the writers give us a unique perspective.

Luke is an educated man of the first century – who has undoubtedly had some first-hand experiences with the first generation of Jesus’ disciples – if not directly with Jesus himself. He records – for us – the events and activities of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection with concern for the Gentile – the non-Jew – who – because of Jesus’ command (to take the gospel into the world) and because of the work of the Holy Spirit – inviting the outsider – the gentile – into the family of God.

For example our reading today – the story of Martha and Mary – is only included in Luke’s gospel. Which makes me wonder – why it was important enough for Luke to include? Perhaps it has to do with Luke wanting to lift up the importance of women – which he does – as disciples of Jesus.

As we come to this story of Martha and Mary – it will be helpful to note that Luke has been telling us about what is required of disciples – of those who wish to follow Jesus.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. For those who wish to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” Jesus says in chapter 9 verses 23 and 24

To the one who wishes to return home to say farewell to his loved ones Jesus says in Chapter 9 verse 62; *“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

As we read around our passage this morning we see Jesus is talking about what is required of those who wish to follow Jesus – to be disciples of Jesus.

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ... “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” 10:27

Lord teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples. ... When you pray say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial. 11:1-4

All this is to say – that it seems that Luke had told us the story of Mary and Martha in order to help us think about our own lives as disciples. But what?

Prayer

Sermon

On August 26, 1910 Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was born in Skopje, Macedonia. At the age of twelve, this young Roman Catholic woman felt strongly the call of God -- she knew she had to be a missionary to spread the love of Christ.

At eighteen she left her parental home in Skopje and joined the Sisters of Loreto, an Irish community of nuns with missions in India. After a few months' training in Dublin she was sent to India, where on May 24, 1931, she took her initial vows as a nun. From 1931 to 1948 Agnes taught at St. Mary's High School in Calcutta, but the suffering and poverty she glimpsed outside the convent walls made such a deep impression on her that in 1948 she received permission from her superiors to leave the convent school and devote herself to working among the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta.

Although she had no funds, she depended on God's providence, and started an open-air school for slum children. Soon she was joined by voluntary helpers, and financial support was also forthcoming. This made it possible for her to extend the scope of her work.

By the time she died - the work that she had begun – the work of reaching out to the poorest of the poor – had spread to the continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. – Over a million Co-Workers working in 40 countries – had joined her in her work of compassion to others.

We know this tiny – driven – compassionate woman – not as Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu – but as Mother Teresaⁱ.

Years after her death – in a book about her life entitled ‘Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light’ⁱⁱ we learned something surprising about Mother Teresa and her relationship with God – it is that for nearly 50 years – she experienced – not the loving presence of Christ with her – but instead – as “*an absent one.*”

In 1979 shortly before receiving the Nobel Peace Prize she wrote in a letter to a spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael van der Peet, “*Jesus has a very special love for you,*” she assured him. “*[But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, -- listen and do not hear – the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ...I want you to pray for me—that I let Him have [a] free hand.*”

In 2006 Donna and I were in Ghana with a group from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. We were spending time with the women’s group – a group of probably a couple hundred women – at a large Presbyterian Church in Kumasi. – One of the students had been asked to give them the devotion for the day. – She chose the passage we read from Luke – the story of Martha and Mary.

In devotion she talked about the demands that women have day in and day out – the demands of home, and children, of spouse and family – the demands of community and of church – she

talked about the busyness of women – and then she said what I myself have said. “*The story of Mary and Martha reminds us that we must set aside our busyness – so that we can sit at the feet of Jesus.*”

In fact this interpretation - would be one that most commentaries would support. Martha – is ‘*distracted by her many tasks*’ – and Mary – well Mary she – in sitting at the Lord’s feet – and listening to what he was saying – ‘*has chosen the better way...*’ – We come away from this story with Mary being lifted up as the model of a disciple – and Martha is the example of the lack of discipline that will be necessary for us as disciples of Jesus.

Which leave those of us – who struggle with are what are often called the spiritual disciplines – of prayer – worship – and even Bible study – feeling guilty – that in the midst of our busyness – that we have little time – or if the truth be told – little inclination – to sit at the feet of Jesus.

But I am wondering – this morning – if I am mis-reading this story – if I have influenced too much by others interpretations – because today – I am seeing something very different.

First – Luke – in including this story – is telling us that women are important to Jesus – and they are among those who have been called to follow him as disciples. The truth is that all the gospels bear witness to this – when we see these faithful women disciples both at the foot of the cross and the first to arrive at the empty tomb – the first to carry the message – “Christ is risen”.

Secondly – the cultural customs of hospitality – are radically embraced by Jesus. Hospitality – the welcoming and providing for all people – are a mark of Jesus’ ministry – and for Luke – a mark of the early church. Martha is providing – the hospitality – that not only her culture demands – but that which will embody Jesus’ own ministry.

So I am left wondering – if the thing that Jesus is rebuking Martha for – is not her unwillingness to sit at his feet – but her willingness to impose what is no doubt – her calling – hospitality – and her giftedness – to welcome – to make comfortable – (at home) – to provide food and drink – on her sister Mary – who seems called and gifted to learn – and then to share – what Jesus is teaching.

It seems to me – that one is not right and the other wrong – but the truth is that they are just different – even as you and I are different. It seems to me that they each have unique gifts – and an individual calling – and it is through the faithful living out of who they are – and how they have been called to use their gifts for the good of the whole – that they live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Mother Teresa – in her personal devotions – in her life of prayer – and worship – did not experience the presence of Christ – but I am not so sure that she did not experience it in her work. – In fact she would say that each of the poor she would serve ‘*was Jesus in disguise.*’

Which echoes the words of the righteous in the gospel of Matthew – where the righteous ask Jesus – “*Lord – when did we see you?*” - To which Jesus answers – ‘*when I was hungry and you gave me food – thirsty and you gave me water – a stranger and you welcomed me...*’ (Mt. 25:31f)

Discipleship begins when – after committing ourselves to following Jesus – we are able to discern who God created us to be – and that we are different – one from another – we have different gifts and different ability and a different calling to use our gifts.

Prayer might look different for you than me. Prayer might look like the preparing of the meal – and the washing of the dishes – it might look like serving the poor in Cedar Rapids or in Haiti – it might look like pounding nails out at Camp Wyoming.

Bible study – might not be about a pile books on your desk – but thinking about what Jesus meant when he talked about the kingdom of heaven – as you serve a meal at the shelter – or as you sit helping a child to improve her reading.

Worship might – not always be about what happens here on a Sunday morning – but it might happen as a group of friends gather for coffee – and one shares their heartbreak for their child as others give support and encouragement.

I am not saying – that one is right and one is wrong – all I am saying is that they are different – and I wonder – as we are called – each of us – all of us – to grow in our faith – what it is that we have to learn about ourselves – how we tick – how we operate – in order to faithfully – without being distracted – by our way – and by the way of others – so that we can focus – our attention – no matter how that might look for us – on Jesus. – Amen.

ⁱ Taken 9/15/11 from website http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1979/teresa-bio.html

ⁱⁱ Van Biemi, David, Mother Teresa, A Crisis of Faith, Time Magazine book review, August 23, 2007 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1655720,00.html#ixzz1YhJ0SqXa>