



July 18, 2010
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

*Activism vs. Contemplation: Dueling Limbs on the Family Tree**
Rev. James Lamkin

Psalm 15; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

I seek and you seek an awareness of the transcendence of God. God who is above us, beyond us, and as the Apostle Paul said, "God in whom all things hold together." Or as Paul Tillich said, "God is the Ground of our Being." I need a sense of the transcendence of God that transcends me.

But, I also need traction, purchase, footing. I need a sense of the next step to take. A reasonable confidence in direction and decisions.

Where transcendence and traction meet is spirituality. For me, it is a part of being church. For me, it is living life "Christian." Maybe that gets at what Paul meant when he spoke of his end game of becoming, "Mature in Christ."

The story before us in the gospel occurs at the corner of Transcendence and Traction. Where the presence of the holy, but also the conflict and comedy of being human collide.

I'm glad this story made it into the Bible. It is as familiar as our own families. It is a family feud between two sisters, AND their attempt to get the preacher mixed-up in it and manage their anxiety for them. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

It reminds me of what I do for a living. "Preacher, you need to tell him, them, her, what to do!"

I believe this is a sacred task. It is a holy calling. To be allowed and invited to stand close enough to families to feel their unfixable pain—but not becoming responsible for fixing it.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”

Life heats up and family friction grinds us down, anxiety is high and creativity is low—and our faith flat lines

The story of Mary and Martha and Jesus holds in tension what feels like a familiar tension—when do you faithfully wait and contemplate; and when is it time to faithfully take action and wait no longer?

Let’s look. Though not said here, probably it is the home of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. In John 11 Mary and Martha send for Jesus to attend to their first dying, then dead brother, Lazarus. Splicing together some references, we see that they are not strangers, they are friends.

Jesus sits and begins to talk. Mary sits at his feet. Martha is attending to other hospitality needs, probably cooking.

Can you see the face of Jesus as he shares. Can you see the rapt attention of Mary as she sits?

The edginess of this story might be about gender. Perhaps Mary is violating a societal rule of women being taught. Luke, more than the other gospel writers is interested in this worthy cause—especially to the early church that was trying to find its way out of patriarchal systems on the one hand, and free licensed secularism on the other. Luke leverages the argument with the best leverage of all: a good story of a contemplative female disciple, soaking in what cannot be taken away. Go Luke. Go Mary.

But out of the corner of your eye you can see the growing consternation of Martha as it builds? What is *like wonder* to Mary is *like salt in a wound* to Martha. For Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus is a Thin Space (the Celts would say) where heaven and earth touch. But one person’s thin space is another person’s scar tissue.

Martha’s consternation grows. How do you let someone know of your consternation...without saying it directly? Slam cabinet doors, maybe? If that doesn’t work, try sighing loudly...graduating your disgust into huffs! Follow that by a few indirect derogatory remarks, like, “Some people have to work hard for a living...but not everybody.”

We all know the techniques.

And we know that when all else fails, bring an innocent bystander into the problem. This can be a relative, a neighbor, a friend, teachers often get put in the middle of a family’s feud, and of course, the minister—these are the usual suspects.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”

My hunch is by complaining to Jesus, Martha’s anxiety went down. She felt better. Of course, everybody else felt worse...but that is a small price to pay.

Jesus decides to get into it. He uses the D-word. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and *distracted* by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

The Jesus/Martha dialogue reminds me of the John Prine song that Hal Meeks sings: Dear Abby, Dear Abby.

Modified to fit these verses it would be:

Martha says:

Dear Jesus, Dear Jesus,
My sister's no good.
She's sittin' there listening
And I'm misunderstood.
If nobody helps me there'll be no more food
Jesus please fix her, I'm not in the mood.
Signed...Distracted.

Then Jesus (ala John Prine) responds:

Distracted, Distracted,
You have no complaint.
You are what you are
And you ain't what you ain't.
Now listen-up sister and listen up good,
Stop wishing for bad luck and knocking on wood.
Signed, Mr. Jesus

Distracted. Maybe that is the preaching end of this text.

And this was before the invention of the I Phone or Blackberry. Before information bombardment. This was before multi-tasking became a family value and busyness a virtue and an important element of job security.

"How are you doing?" I am so busy. "Good."

Some think this is here to address the early church's tension between activism and contemplation. A war that still exists today. In fact, it exists in me today.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and *distracted* by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." In other words, "Don't just do something, sit there!"

But to not take action, when it is time to take action, is to collude with evil.

In churches like ours, when the tension between the contemplatives and the activists grows to a fever pitch—when the missional folk are at odds with the educational folk...there is only one thing left to do: get the Finance Committee involved! Which will we fund...more mission actions, or more aesthetic attentiveness? And exactly how do you define "missions" anyway?

No wonder the Finance Committee comes out of those meeting wobbling like Jacob at the Jabrok with his hip out-of-joint.

The story of Mary and Martha is not ambiguous. It lobbies on the side of contemplation. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and *distracted* by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part."

But remember last week's text? The story just before this one. The Good Samaritan...good not because of prayerful thought, not because of meditative introspection, but because of action.

Perhaps these two stories should be taken in tandem—like sisters, really. For without discerning contemplation we can easily jump on our horses and ride off in every direction. Without intentional action, contemplation paves the road to hell with its good intention.

The healthy church has a rich mixture of both. Like threads, strands, interlaced, forming a strong stretcher on which to carry the wounded of this world...and pressed parchment on which to artistically express what can't be narrowly defined.

The best book I've seen on this is Parker Palmer's *The Active Life*—and how action and prayer are the yin and yang of a healthy spirituality. I would have consulted it again for this sermon, but I've loaned it out. So whomever has it...I will expect it back soon.

And maybe sometimes, contemplation is action. sometimes listening is doing. I heard John Claypool speak to this 30 years ago. It was like a crowbar in my ear—I'd never thought of it before. I was more conservative back then.

Claypool mused, "if Jesus was speaking and Mary was sitting at his feet listening...what was he saying?"

I remember thinking, "Jesus would be giving her a rough draft of the Sermon on the Mount...maybe the top five parables that have gone well. Deep stuff."

Claypool wondered, "What if Jesus was saying, I am tired and I need to be listened to."

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He could see the storm clouds gathering. Tension was building. And maybe he needed more than anything else, to be heard. And he needed it more than he needed food.

He needed a place to unpack his heart. And exactly how many places and people are there in your life with whom you feel safe to unpack your heart?

That is real hospitality—the capacity to be attentive to the guest's needs rather than the host assuming she or he knew.

The affirmation goes to Mary, she has chosen the best part. She offered sitting and listening.

Eugene Peterson translates this: Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and it won't be taken from her."

Like most Bible stories it finishes unfinished. What we are supposed to do is unclear.

For you it may be to attend to the contemplative in you a bit more? To sequester time in the early morning to pray and read the Bible and journal and meditate as if you are sitting at the feet of Christ. That is the tug of the text on me.

Maybe it is to say no to some of the busy stuff in your life. to triage your energy and time and spend more quality time in relationships.

Maybe all we can do is pray that we don't miss out on "the main course." To be aware of the transcendence of God, present in this world, and to be attentive to that will be nourishment, will be entrée aplenty.

*These are some of the notes from which James Lamkin preached this morning's sermon.