“Be Here Now”

A sermon preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

March 18 2018

Scripture: Luke 10: 38 - 42

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One of the areas of ministry that requires great care and a keen sense of responsibility is that of scriptural interpretation. We must be vigilant in getting to the core meaning of a passage and, if necessary, noting any words or statements that can produce an otherwise questionable message. This is especially the case of words that are attributed to Jesus.

Author and one of the most influential Christian Apologists of his time, C.S.Lewis, whose book “Mere Christianity” was voted the best book of the 20th Century by “Christianity Today,” is a little more direct concerning the potential misuse of Scripture and I quote: “It is Christ himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers, will bring us to him. We must not use the Bible as a sort of encyclopedia out of which texts can be taken for use as weapons.”

This morning we have revisited a well-known gospel story which will serve to demonstrate this point. The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10: 38 – 42) is one of the many where the narrative can infer that one of the character’s actions or behaviour is inferior to that of another character. As a result such an interpretation has down through the centuries given rise to an unfair judgment where the biblical Mary is unfairly elevated above the biblical Martha. By extension the same unfair distinction is made in today’s world when the terms *Mary* and *Martha* are used to describe the temperaments of the *contemplative* and the *active* or those who are *doing* and those who are simply *being.* The underlying message casts a negative view of Martha’s attention to *doing.* Of course let’s not overlook that along with the Marys and the Marthas are the Bills and the Bobs!

The story of Martha and Mary welcoming Jesus to their home has, through a questionable interpretation or a systemic bias, raised Mary up whilst placing Martha in an inferior role. We hear folks referring to themselves in a sort of self-deprecating way as either a Mary or a Martha with the underlying message really being about their personal comfort levels. The inference here is that in the story Martha’s busyness in extending hospitality is a *lesser* role. The implied judgment in this scenario does the story a great disservice.

For several years there was a church publication for clergy called *AHA*. It was a creative resource for preachers. The title *AHA* was most appropriate in that it speaks to the fact that when we truly reach into and fully engage a scripture passage, very often we discover something new and utter the word *aha* to ourselves or to others. I am sure that there have been times in your life when you have uttered this word *Aha* when you suddenly saw something in different light, usually in a way that was helpful. Often referred to as a paradigm shift. This is not of course limited to the study of scripture in that there are times when we discover something about ourselves which can lead to transformation and a healthier well-being.

It is always helpful to understand the context in which this meeting in Bethany took place. At this point in Jesus’ ministry he had set his sights towards Jerusalem. He was about to address the final agenda items in his ministry which would lead to the cross and his death. It is important to keep this in mind as it helps us to understand the mind and needs of Jesus as he arrived in Bethany, just two miles from his final destination. Here he was with his close and intimate friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus with whom he had established a special bond. Here was a *safe haven* where he could be himself during a time of personal agony. Let’s keep in mind that Jesus experienced all the same human responses as we do…joy, fear, hurt, disappointment, anger, pain, and yes I am sure the thought crossed his mind from time to time as to whether his journey was worth it. If there was ever a time when Jesus needed to be understood in the human sense, it was upon his arrival at the home of his friends. We find him in need of what the hymn writer calls a “quiet centre.” We might ponder the questions: “What did Jesus need? “What was he feeling?” “What were his expectations of Mary and Martha?”

This record of Jesus’ visit to the home of Mary and Martha does not call for us to make any judgment as to who was acting right and who was acting wrong. The question to ask is more along the lines of what was most appropriate for the circumstances.

The late Bible Commentator William Barclay, who I dare say has helped many novice preachers, says that “What we have here can be described as a *clash of temperaments.* We have never allowed enough for the place of temperament in religion. For some reason in the church we have some unease and little tolerance for different temperaments. Some people are naturally dynamos of activity; others are naturally quiet. Active people have difficulty accepting those who are more contemplative. By the same token those who are devoted to quiet times and meditation don’t understand those who are constantly active. There is no right or wrong in this. God did not make everyone alike. What we need to acknowledge however is that whether dynamo or contemplator, both are serving God.”

Martha clearly resides in the active category as she was eager to celebrate Jesus’ visit. She wanted to lay on the very best that the house could offer. So she was completely absorbed in the preparations. It was hospitality in the extreme – but nonetheless it was not exactly what Jesus needed at that particular moment. With a heavy heart and a need to have a break from the demanding crowds, he simply wanted a moment of calmness. It was Mary who understood and recognized this need and is portrayed in a contemplative mood at Jesus’ feet, listening intently to what he might have been saying.

Martha, having great difficulty with this shared her frustration by saying to Jesus, “Don’t you care that my sister has left me alone to do the serving? Tell her to give me a hand.” Note that Jesus refuses to be drawn into a triangle and replies by saying, “Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. Only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part, and it is not going to be taken from her.”

Let me interject here because the words purported to have been spoken by Jesus appear to reflect negatively on Martha. One of the helpful resources that came into publication in 1993 and which I have referenced on a previous occasion was the work of the Jesus Seminar with the title The Five Gospels . . . What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus. The Jesus Seminar consisted of seventy- six distinguished biblical scholars. Their task was to look at some 1500 sayings of Jesus in the four Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas (one that didn’t make the canon) and determine their authenticity, or lack thereof. Each saying was assigned a colour code as follows: Red . . . Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it. Pink . . . Jesus probably said something like this. Gray . . . Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own. Lastly Black. . . Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition. For the record, I note that the purported words of Jesus in verses 41 & 42 in Luke chapter 10 are assigned the colour code of black. Scholarship and some of the best theological minds reached this conclusion.

It is here that we need to be careful and look deeper into this interchange between Jesus and Martha. If the position is taken that Jesus did in fact say these words then clearly here is the origin of a bias that resides in today’s society. To suggest that Mary’s actions were better than those of Martha seems uncharacteristic of Jesus to be the author of what might be viewed as a *put down*. I don’t think that you will find an instance in the life of Jesus as we know it that he ever put anyone down. In fact in the most difficult encounters he never diminished the other person or persons in any way. Challenging, yes. Direct, yes. But rarely if ever a *put down.*

In the final analysis, today’s gospel story is not about kitchens and cooking and serving, and particularly the misperceptions as to the nature of women’s work. Neither is the story necessarily about women. It simply serves as a caution to each one of us to recognize that whether a Martha or Bill or a Mary or Bob, all are serving. All work is of value and noble.

The story of Mary and Martha brings to mind my earlier life in the corporate sector, I recall the weekly meeting with the company president. As I sat in front of his desk, immediately in my view was a tent card, the words on which prompted my attention and set the stage for what was expected of me. The three words were simply *BE HERE NOW.* The same words appeared on the other side of the tent card and served as a similar reminder to my boss.

What was expected was active listening, a conversation of substance, getting to the heart of the matter without beating around the bush. In other words, being real, direct and dealing with the priorities of that particular moment.

In essence, what we see in today’s gospel story is Mary responding with compassion to what was Jesus’ prime need at that particular moment. She sat at his feet as an active and attentive listener.

The fact of the matter is that Marthas and Marys or Bills and Bobs reside within each one of us. The message for us today is to be alert to when we need to be *doing* and when we need to be simply *being.* Today’s story is not about a comparison of roles. It is not about judgment. It is about a moment of need which called for Mary to *be here now.* Amen.