Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“An Open Door”* Luke 10:38-42

When we think of Mary and Martha, when Martha asks Jesus to enter Eunuch, I certainly hope she did not whine it. Do you hear her whining it? I hate to think of Martha as a whiner.

Booker T. Washington was born in 1856, in Virginia. He was the son of a slave named Jane, so he was a slave, too. After emancipation, Jane moved the family to West Virginia. During the Civil War, West Virginia seceded from Virginia and joined the Union as a free state. Booker T. was six years old at the time.

Washington’s father, Washington Ferguson, was already there, waiting for the family, and in the ensuing years, Booker T. Washington was able to receive an education and even go to college. He worked his way through Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, a historically black college (which is now Hampton University) and attended college at Wayland Seminary (which is now Virginia Union University).

In his most famous work, his autobiography called *Up From Slavery,* Booker T. Washington preached a philosophy of hard work, racial solidarity and…accommodation. He urged blacks to *accept* discrimination *for the time* *being* and concentrate on elevating themselves through hard work and the building and acquiring of wealth.

Washington believed in education in the crafts, industrial and farming skills and the cultivation of the virtues of patience, enterprise and thrift. This, he said, would win the respect of whites and lead to African Americans being fully accepted as citizens and integrated into all strata of society.

As you can well imagine, Booker T. Washington had his critics. Chief among them was another towering black intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois. In an article on the PBS website, their relationship is described in this manner:

*W.E.B. Du Bois, said no–*[to] *Washington’s strategy* [which Du Bois maintained] *would serve only to perpetuate white oppression. Du Bois advocated political action and a civil rights agenda….In addition, he argued that social change could be accomplished by developing the small group of college-educated blacks he called “the Talented Tenth:”*

*“The Negro Race,* [he wrote] *like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education then, among Negroes, must first of all deal with the “Talented Tenth.” It is the problem of developing the best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the worst.”*

*At the time, the Washington/Du Bois dispute polarized African American leaders into two wings–the ‘conservative’ supporters of Washington, and his ‘radical’ critics.*

*The Du Bois philosophy of agitation and protest for civil rights flowed directly into the Civil Rights movement which began to develop in the 1950’s and exploded in the 1960’s.*

*Booker T. today is associated, perhaps unfairly, with the self-help/color-blind/Republican/ Clarence Thomas/Thomas Sowell wing of the black community and its leaders.*

As diametrically opposed as these two men were, both of their contributions to the African American community, the African American experience in particular, and the heart and soul of the entire country (in the wider sense) cannot be over-estimated. They opened the door for all of us. They educated all of us on what it means to work hard, and take advantage of every opportunity to help themselves and others. They both raised the consciousness of all people on the subject of racial prejudice. They were not related by blood, and we continue to struggle with both men’s approach to the problem, but both were dedicated to moving the African American community closer to realizing the promise of this country. And so, they were most assuredly brothers in the larger sense of the word.

In the story we heard from the Bible, two sisters—Martha and Mary—have also been at the center of a debate as to how to receive their story.

On the one hand, Jesus clearly affirms Mary as having chosen *“the better part”*[v,42]. Indeed, Mary has chosen the non-traditional part wherein she, a *woman,* was told that sitting at Jesus’ feet to receive his wisdom and instruction was appropriate and even admirable. Further, she was told that this new role she had carved out for herself, was not going to be taken from her. Mary was a disciple, *even though she was* ***not*** *a man!*

We applaud Mary and her single-minded desire to hear and gather for herself the words of life from Jesus Christ, her Savior. Mary is a disciple and has been an example and *proof* that Jesus saw and welcomed her as such.

Martha, on the other hand, has been characterized as the kitchen-drudge and a scold. She is the one Jesus gently chided. She is the one who cannot see past the traditional gender-based prescriptions for women. What is worse, she is the one who attempts to engage Jesus as an ally to compel her own sister back into the established role and function of women of their time.

Yet, I cannot help thinking that receiving this story on such black-and-white terms also misses the mark. It misses the fullness of Jesus’ story and his good news. What we may sometimes forget is that Martha is acting out of hospitality.  The hospitality of this home is her responsibility because as we heard (but sometimes miss in the reading): this is *her* home.

As one commentator has observed:

*In the ancient world (and in traditional communities today), extending hospitality to travelers is an absolute requirement.  According to texts in the Bible (and not according to homophobic biblical interpreters), Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because the people living there sinned against hospitality.*(This is how crucial hospitality was in this culture.)

*Martha’s busy-ness is therefore not a target for current critiques of our cult of Busy.  We have convinced ourselves that we must at all times be overworked, too busy, working as hard as we can.  Martha is not one of us and she does not share our cultic behaviors.  We make ourselves endlessly busy as part of our pathology.  Martha is busy with the essential tasks of offering hospitality to travelers.  There is a difference.*

Well, amen to *that!* But also a strong amen to the fact that Luke preserved for us a story that did, indeed, open a new door for women. Mary’s choice to sit at Jesus’ feet—this was the traditional posture of a disciple and Jesus welcomed her. That Mary engaged in study with a teacher suggests that Torah study was being open to women now, and from now on. From then on, hearing the Word of God so that we might also be counted among those worthy enough to receive eternal life is also open to women. We, too, are disciples.

As for Martha, rather than judge her, it is important to remember how much of Jesus’ ministry was also about hospitality. Indeed, most of us here have probably noticed that this story comes right after the story of “The Good Samaritan,” a story of truly radical hospitality because the person being held-up as a model of goodness and compassion was one of the most despised members of Jewish society at that time: a Samaritan. A person from a group of people who were thought of as unclean in body, but also in mind and spirit.

Last Sunday, I was able to tune into the Rev. David Turner’s sermon over at Church of the Crossroads and he described the story of the Good Samaritan by saying that Samaritans were so despised by Jews that if the injured man (in the Good Samaritan story) was even the least bit conscious and saw who was caring for him, even in his injured, life-threatened state, that Jewish person would have thought to himself, “O Lord, let me be saved by *anyone* but this filthy Samaritan!”

Yet, hospitality that leads to compassion is so important to Jesus that after telling *that* story, he extends to *Mary* the discipleship traditionally reserved to men. This must have been as shocking to Mary, Martha, and all of the people around the three of them.

What this says to me is that the truth of the matter—the truth of this story that we are meant to remember—is not quite so black-and-white as we may see it.

As we consider the entirety of Jesus’ “good news to all people” perhaps, instead of criticizing Martha, what we should do is recognize that the door has been opened to a complete involvement, contribution, and participation in the salvation-life Jesus. This entails learning more about *and* showing the love of God. This is open to all of us—to all people.

As for Martha and Mary: mostly, their story is about “focus.” It is about knowing what to focus on and when. It is about not being distracted by the many things that fill all of our lives—especially all of the things that compete for our attention and our loyalty.

Yes, there is a place and time for everything, and this time, Mary is chosen “the better part.” However, while this is true, it is also true that Martha is *doing* what Mary is *learning* and (yes) Mary’s part is conscious and deliberate, while Martha’s actions and activities are an unconscious, unchallenged *response* to her circumstances.

What I believe is at the heart of this story is that Mary has found what makes hospitality more than a cultural or traditional response. From that point on, Mary (and hopefully Martha, too), will recognize that to offer compassion, and caring to all people is only possible if your actions flow from the source of all love and compassion—from the One who taught us how to love by sending Christ to us in the first place.

This is what holds all of life together because this is the kind of love that *sees* all human beings as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters; sons and daughters of God who are equally loved, equally cherished. It is in this kind of love that we may also see that a lasting and blessed peace will come to all human communities only after it has been ushered through the (often long) corridors of justice.

Returning for a moment to Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Du Bois, despite their differences their lives and work also vibrates with one particular value. Both men were anxious for the African American people of this country to know the promise of justice. Both were aware of and concerned for the brokenness throughout society that made for such injustice and anguish among the people of their race. It is that recognition—the capacity for seeing what was most important and acting—this is what inspired them and made their work possible.

And this is our good news: that there is one good thing in our lives that holds us all together. If we can make our way past all other distractions, we may come to see that learning the way of compassion is the most important thing we can ever do—learning the way of God or father and mother, who sent us a Savior to teach us and to lead us. Jesus, our Redeemer, who opened a door to love, peace, and life—even eternal life.

May we all come to focus on that each on our own, and together as the body of Christ. Amen.