

## **GOOD, BETTER, BEST**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on July 18, 2010*

### **Crossroads United Church, Kingston**

**Amos 8:1-12**

**Luke 10:38-42**

When I was a young girl I remember my mother imparting three pieces of advice that she hoped that I would adopt and live by as I lived my life. I am sure that she shared more worldly and wise teachings and hopes, but these three stand out above the others. At sundry points in my primary and junior life I recall being counseled to not attend university as it would only fill my head with ideas and notions that were counter to what my parental units saw as true. My mother saw higher education as the “ruination” of young people. I was told that I should abstain from alcohol, and never date a catholic. Now, it is not that I have chosen to deliberately defy my mother’s counsel or wishes; however, I must confess that my mother’s hopes for me have not become integrated into my living as she had once hoped.

I have attained three degrees from two universities. I not only dated a catholic, but also, have been married to a catholic for 27 years and I do enjoy a glass of wine, most days, with my dinner. So when I visit the text of Jesus visiting the home of Martha it is not so much the challenging of accepted norms and conventions of the day that resonates, but rather the response of Jesus to the choices made by both of the women. That he places higher value on the choice of Mary to break with convention over Martha’s need to be constrained by convention affirms me in my day and generation.

Like the parable of the Good Samaritan that we visited last week this story is familiar and nigglesome. And like its predecessor parable it can leave us feeling more than a little disconcerted in its wake. Some will be entirely sympathetic towards Martha who is pulling out all of the stops of conventional hospitality for Jesus’ comfort and enjoyment. Rather than being appreciative of her efforts, Jesus seems to almost scold her for her attention to detail. This may cause those who view themselves as contemporaries of Martha, and exemplary at hospitality and less comfortable with

thought and academe, as though their gifts are less significant. At the same time, while Mary is applauded for her curiosity and desire to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn, at no point in the story do we read that she offered an opinion, or insight, or posed a theological question for debate. She seems to have added nothing to the discourse but her presence. She is given no counsel to go and do likewise as was the lawyer in the parable. Neither is she given a commission to go into the world to preach, teach, heal or baptize.

Throughout much of my career as a minister of word, sacrament and pastoral care I have had to contend with those, both inside and outside of community, who question my call and vocation. There are still many-both within our denomination and from other sister denominations-who do not see a role for women in the ministry of word and sacrament. To those of us who have not only discerned a call to vocation, but also survived both the process towards ordination and a career in ministry, this text may have been used as a proof text along the way as a means of justifying the presence of women among the ordained. And yet, in this account Mary is not given a voice to preach, teach or share any of the insights that she gleaned while seated at the feet of Jesus-which is also patriarchal rhetoric for subservience. And so we have two women who may not have received that which they sought from the master-neither affirmation for following convention nor permission to completely abandon it.

In her commentary on Luke, Sharon Ringe, refers to this narrative as a sad one for women. Martha comes across as welcoming, but whining as she complains to the master about the lack of her sister's help in providing for Jesus and his entourage. Mary's presence in the entourage is noted, but hardly affirmed because she sits there in silence. One woman embraces convention and duty but turns to the man Jesus to intercede for her when her sister sits idle. And the other woman, though lauded for opting for the contemplative rather than embracing her prescribed societal obligations, is captured in our mind's eye as mute, powerless and not ceded any influence.

There will be no argument that there is not a place for the gifts of Martha and the gifts of Mary. Where would the church of Christ be if not for the efforts-primarily but no longer exclusively of women- who have sewed and baked and cooked and raised money for mission and maintenance down through the history of Christendom? Equally as significant are the contributions made to scholarship and insight into the theology of the Christian church by women, from all corners of the globe. And yet, we must not collude with the notion that these are mutually exclusive and assume that the gifts and ministries of women are either/or. Rather, we must allow room for the gifts of women to be both/and- including both hospitality and nurture and that of wisdom and curiosity. As I read this account in my day and generation I am mindful of the challenges that women in vocation continue to know as modern day realities.

There are still those who see the profession of ministry as a vocation for men, and the preference to see and hear a man in the pulpit continues to be an issue. The tasks of the profession demand that a minister of word, sacrament and pastoral care likewise be both/and- both intellectually and theologically engaging and also able to nurture with integrity and compassion. I would in no wise suggest that a man is incapable of demonstrating patience and loving kindness any more than I would suggest that a woman is incapable of engaging and thought provoking wisdom. Indeed, as the church of Christ continues to exercise ministry in a pluralistic, technological and evolving world, it behooves all of us as servants to be both smart and caring in the exercise of duty. We need to possess and demonstrate wisdom and compassion, intelligence and nurture, hospitality and curiosity. This may be the greatest gift that we have received through feminism: women are freer to embrace the power side of our God given personality and gifts, and men have been given the permission to embrace the more nurturing.

As fathers have long been present in the delivery rooms when their children are born they have involvement in the care of the children from birth in ways that few of us will recall our father's helping out. Household responsibilities are shared by busy parents-both of whom often work outside of the home- and children grow up exposed to

more fluid lines of demarcation between the sexes. Women have served as head's of state and moderator's-and while I would in no wise suggest that the world is completely egalitarian, we have witnessed many changes in gender roles and convention. My hope is that good will continue to transition to the better and that the day will come when justice will prevail socially, politically, racially and spiritually. At the same time I understand that we live in a reality of not yet, and the best is, hopefully, yet to come.

Martha is busy and preoccupied with the conventions of her day and appeals to Jesus to tell Mary to get up off of her derriere and help. Rather than colluding with Martha Jesus holds up the mirror and says, "Martha, you are distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing and Mary has chosen the better part." Fred Craddock in his commentary is eager to keep the differences between Mary and Martha in a kind of equilibrium. He writes, "If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. (Craddock-Luke-152).

This scripture is one that is much beloved and familiar to many- not unlike the Parable of the Good Samaritan- but as we ponder it in the year of our Lord 2010 we are left with questions. The role of women in Luke's day is still shrouded in mystery. Though he is unafraid and unashamed to hold up the place of women in the entourage of Jesus, it has not been made completely clear how he viewed their presence or contribution. And so the story is ours to interpret and ponder through the lens of both history and post modernity. There will be those responsibilities that shall continue to be subject to gender demarcation and social convention. But we celebrate the truth that social norms are fluid and subject to ongoing change and transformation. We celebrate as well that we can be room for both nurturing and the contemplative in the living of our lives, and in the life of faith.

I do not think my mother is ashamed of the fact that I chose not to embrace and integrate all of her counsel into the living of my life. I think that she takes some notion of

maternal pride in the accomplishments that I have made within my vocation as a minister. And I know that she has much love and respect for my choice of a life partner. And while I have never asked her, I would like to think that as parents reflect upon the lives lived and choices made by their children, that we could likewise be transformed and enlightened by the example that our children model for us.

The times are a changing as the times have always been changing. The best may be an evolving dream and vision that is yet to come. But in the meantime we can celebrate that as men and women and as disciples and followers it is our responsibility to embrace and use all of our gifts-as wise and keen seekers and purveyors of kindness and hospitality- and also as agents and servants of the gospel. In the wisdom of Jesus there is a time to go and do, and a time to fret less about the demands and conventions of the day and sit and reflect. In both our action and in our meditation may we honour the name of Christ. Amen.