

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Radical Inclusiveness of God's Grace

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Laura Westerlage
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Scripture Reading: Luke 10:38-42 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I need to be honest with all of you. I have always disliked this story of Mary and Martha. I do remember being taught this story as a young girl in Sunday school and not liking it and what my teachers had to say about it. And now being in seminary and studying this story in my New Testament class I have found that still I don't like this story and some of my fellow classmates identified their feelings when reading this story and when reading different commentaries. Their feelings were similar to mine.

So why do I and others not like this story? Well frankly it is because we identify with Martha. Here is a woman who is working hard to be hospitable, meet the needs of her guests, family and friends, and to do what she feels is the right thing to be doing. While her sister Mary is sitting and listening to Jesus talk, probably amongst the disciples and other guests who might have been there. So Martha goes to Jesus and complains and says "why is Mary not helping me? Can't you tell her to get up and do what is right by helping her sister meet the needs of you and your disciples?" And in my mind she does this rightfully! It isn't fair that Mary who is not helping gets to sit and enjoy the company of Jesus. Especially when her sister is doing all the work!

After Martha complains to Jesus he responds to her plea. And this is the part that really stirs me up. In my mind this is how I would want Jesus to respond and perhaps this is what Martha was looking for too when she went to Jesus. I want Jesus to say, "You know Martha you're right. You've been working hard and it isn't fair that Mary is not helping you. Mary why don't you go and finish up the preparations and Martha have a sit. Take a load off, you've certainly earned it."

This is what I want to hear, but it certainly is not what Jesus says to Martha. Rather Jesus says, "Martha you are too worried and distracted about many things. There is need for one thing." If I was Martha hearing this would hurt my feelings; I would think that Jesus was rebuking me for what I thought was the right thing to be doing. Next Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her." So not only is Jesus rebuking Martha but he is saying that Mary is doing the right thing and that he is not going to tell her to get up and help. I'm sorry, but this isn't fair. Martha was doing what she thought was correct and felt that Mary did not deserve to be listening to Jesus because she wasn't doing the correct thing. But Jesus tells her that this just isn't the case. Rather, I think Jesus is calling attention to a question of why do we believe that there is a way to earn grace?

How many of us have been in a similar situation, where we are trying so hard to do the right thing to do what we feel we are being called to do and the person next to us is (in our eyes) slacking off, not helping, and just being plain rude? I remember as a young child in school being so scared of getting in trouble that

I would do everything right and when I saw someone breaking rules I couldn't stand it. Why weren't they getting in trouble? Why did the teacher let them get away with it? It is not fair.

This story reminds me of the parable of the prodigal son. This is another story where we see two siblings who are doing two very different things. One brother goes off and spends his inheritance on "wild things" while the other brother stays home devoted to the work of their father. When the one brother returns home because he has spent all his money and is starving their father welcomes him with open arms and even throws a celebration for him. His brother is upset and does not understand the grace and love that his father is giving his brother who has been doing the wrong thing. He responds with asking his father "why haven't you thrown me a celebration? I have been doing all the right things and have been devoted to you. Why does my brother who is undeserving receive treatment the same or even better than me?"

I think especially as American's we can relate to these questions of Martha and the brother of the prodigal son. There is this mentality here in our nation that we earn what we deserve. We are supposed to work hard and follow the rules in order to get ahead and receive praise. As children that is how we are disciplined. If we do something wrong we get in trouble and if we do the right thing we receive a gold star or some sort of reward. If you are not successful in this country then you probably aren't working hard enough. Or, in our country we have this mentality of right vs. wrong. We know what is normal, what is acceptable in our society. If you don't fit that mold or that mindset then something is wrong with you and you won't fit in. In the history of our nation we can see this in race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, economic status and more. We believe there is some cosmic order of right and wrong and that we are responsible for keeping these things in line or even imposing our ideas of right and wrong on other countries. And sadly we see this attitude ever-present in our own churches. We read and interpret the bible and figure out what is right and wrong and sometimes oblige that on all people we encounter. We believe we are the bearers or the police of how we are to receive God's grace and love.

The Presbyterian Church USA had its 219th general assembly meeting a couple weeks ago in Minneapolis. I am not sure how much you all have heard or read about what happened during that week long meeting but there was definitely some exciting and difficult issues that were discussed and voted on. I was at the General assembly in 2004 as a Youth Advisory Delegate, and during the week I was overwhelmed and a little distraught about the negative and hurtful attitudes that were ever-present throughout the week, especially around issues of homosexuality and ordination. People were full of fear and hurt, no matter what side of the issue they were on. These issues that our church wrestles with and votes on are difficult and uncomfortable for people. It scares us because it requires change to what we might believe or what our world has taught us is right and wrong.

Martha, the brother of the prodigal son, our nation, our churches, all of us encounter this feeling of being frustrated or uncomfortable with who gets to be included. We create right versus wrong and in turn someone is always going to be cast out. We feel that the conservatives are wrong, mean, hurtful and certainly not doing the right things. Or we feel that the liberals are too lax, corrupt, or certainly not following God's will. You see, we all find ourselves perpetuating this dichotomy of right versus wrong. And because we do this we find ourselves reading stories like Mary and Martha and thinking it isn't fair.

So yes, we are taught to believe that doing the right thing is the way to get ahead in this life. What a difficult and suffocating way to live. But God's calling for a radical new community does not involve this way of thinking. Rather we are all equal and one because God's love is freely given to ALL whether they are doing what society deems normative, correct, just or right. Jesus is telling Martha that Mary may not be doing what Martha thinks is right or what society would want her to do. Jesus wants Martha to take a load off, enjoy her company, and not worry about the things that are expected of her. This way of living

and thinking is radical and in turn is uncomfortable for us at times. Uncomfortable because it goes against what our society has taught us. We don't know what happens next in this story. But perhaps Martha got more frustrated or even stormed off in anger. I think a lot of times when we are told that what we believe to be right is actually wrong we can get angry.

But maybe instead Martha realized what Jesus was saying to her and she was able to enjoy her company and in turn felt free from the pressures of her society to be hospitable and a servant in her home. I think we experience this freedom when we encounter the gospel and its message of God's radical and inclusive grace; one that frees us from the expectations, demands, restrictions, oppressions, and the things of our world.

God's radical grace frees us to love one another in such a way that is inclusive and leaves no one outcast. In the Gospel Jesus consistently offends people's sense of what is right and wrong. God said that even our virtues would be burned away. So yes, we feel Martha's frustration because we all try to do the right thing or we feel the pressures of our world upon us. But amen to Jesus' response to Martha because it brings relief and freedom to love God, love neighbor and love ourselves in such a radical new way. Thanks be to God.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,

- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God’s creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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