

“Mary & Martha”
by Rev. Nancy Landauer
8/21/2011

Back in Minnesota we had a beautiful stained glass window in our church of Mary and Martha. There was an inscription under the window. It said, “Only one thing is needed.”

In the picture, Mary, lost in reverie, is sitting at Jesus’ feet. Martha, standing nearby with her feet apart, is holding a mixing bowl and shaking her finger at Mary. It’s that moment in the story when Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?”

I didn’t like that picture at all. I had two older sisters. I had heard that one-liner used against me a few too many times already. “Mother, Nancy isn’t helping with the dishes.” “Mother, Nancy didn’t practice her piano.” I doubt my mother liked that picture in the church, either. The nightly evening argument about whose turn it is to clean up the kitchen and do the dishes is pretty much standard argument in all houses with children.

I have had my granddaughters with me a lot lately. The argument seems to be alive and well, whose turn is it to sit in the front seat? Whose turn is it on the computer? Who gets to eat the last cupcake? Who already has two dresses when the other sister doesn’t have **any**, never mind of course, that the one sister has never shown the slightest interest in having a dress. Well I could go on for quite a while, but we certainly all get the point. Life is unfair and we are all very busy little campers trying to make sure we get our share of the goodie pile.

The argument is probably as old as time, at least it goes back to Aristotle. The New Testament held Mary and Martha up as kind of archetypes, or opposite symbols. One person is contemplative and one person is industrious, one person is relaxed and is a good scholar the other person is restless, caring for the body’s daily needs. These two qualities were not only juxtaposed to each other, they were also ranked and judged by Aristotle. Aristotle thought that the contemplative life is to be judged to be the more superior. Mary has chosen the better part. Contemplation is spiritual and essential to the well lived life, while Martha in this tradition is seen as useful but somewhat narrow and limited. Western thought going all the way back to the early Greek philosophers has been predisposed to regard “pure” theory above the practice. Intellectual labor has been regarded as well above and more important than manual labor.

When the reformation came along early in the 16th century, monasteries were closed, libraries burned, beautiful organs and stained glass windows smashed. One would have thought that as contemplation was devalued, the status of Martha would rise. That’s not what happened however, Martha’s image of the practical and pragmatic woman was even further degraded. Martin Luther said, “Martha, your work must be punished and regarded for nothing....I do not want any work but Mary’s and that is faith.” Poor Martha.

Actually, the only help Martha got along the way was from the mystics of the thirteenth century. I always think of the thirteenth century women mystics as cloistered women who had all the time in the world to meditate and have visions and dream. This is not true for most of them, I later discovered. They traveled all over the world, did business, built convents, and were sought after for their opinions on political events. It wasn't a woman, though, who brought some respect to Martha; it was a man, Meister Eckert who died in 1328. Meister Eckert wrote a sermon in which he compared Mary to a still immature Christian in the initial stages of faith development, while Martha was the mature and more experienced person who had a better understanding of what was most needed. "Martha was afraid her sister would get stuck in sweetness and well being," Eckert observed. "Martha wished Mary to be more like herself." Eckert, in the spirit of the flourishing women's movement in the church, said that Christ had meant, "Be calm, Martha, don't worry about your sister. She, too, has chosen a good part. This sweet immaturity will get lost from her, but later on the highest good will be bestowed upon her. She will be blessed like you." He meant Mary would become more pragmatic and practical as she matured.

What does all this mean for us? What does it mean for women? Why should men care? Well, the first thing we need to do is rediscover Martha. The second thing we all need to do is bring our own Mary and Martha personalities together. We need to understand the strength of Martha and make her power our own. We need to see her not only as she appears in this story, but also as she appears in John 11, in the raising of Lazarus. When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead it is Martha who is the active one. It is Martha who argues with Jesus as Job did with God. She acts and talks pragmatically. She protests and says, "Lord, after 4 days in the grave my brother will stink." And she thinks theologically when she confesses Christ. She says, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." The only other disciple who confesses that Jesus is Christ the Messiah is Peter. Martha is a lot like Peter, the one out in front, the outspoken one, leading the pack.

Rediscovering this strong and powerfully theological woman helps us to take the power away from those who dominate. There are those who like to dominate just so that they can act and don't have to justify themselves. Domination over others is always directed against the more vulnerable people in our society. Dominating over others always involves contempt and ridicule and trivialization of others.

It helps to rediscover Martha: the strong, self assured, down to earth, lucid woman. In the story of Lazarus, Mary throws herself at Jesus' feet weeping. It is Martha who argues that that Jesus was close by and should have come earlier to save Lazarus. Martha is rather impertinent. She is the truth teller, a female Peter. Maybe she is not always right, but she is always in there pitching. She is always in there juggling, wrestling, and using all her energy to find the truth.

While Meister Eckert got it started, the image of Martha continued to be redeemed by the church legends in the early middle ages. According to the Archbishop of Genoa who wrote some of the stories down, Martha was supposed to be a Syrian

princess. After Jesus' crucifixion and during the persecution of the earliest Christians, Martha and Mary and four other people were put in a boat with no oars, no helm, and no sails. Miraculously, they ended up in Marseille, France. Martha founded a convent and later went to the south of France to slay dragons. Martha is also said to have had a garden in which she put a picture of Jesus. All the plants in the garden had miraculous healing powers.

Well, I guess that is something for us all to remember. Martha sailed away for a year and a day and landed in France where she became the queen of all wild things and healed anybody who came to her garden!

There have been many pictures of Mary and Martha over the years. Most of them capturing that moment when Mary is scolded by Martha, and Jesus says there is one thing most needed. Now that we have rediscovered a new image for Martha, the other really important thing for us to remember is that people today do not have to be divided between doers and dreamers. We don't have to choose between contemplation and gentleness on the one hand, and a practical energetic fullness of life. We need both.

Teresa of Avila, who followed in the mystic tradition of the early middle ages, was very vocal about the fact that the world needed both qualities of Martha and Mary. She said "Believe me, Mary and Martha must be together to accommodate the Lord. In order to accommodate the Christ among us, we need to involve ourselves in both of the attributes of Mary and Martha. How could Mary, who sat at his feet, have offered food to the Lord if Martha had not jumped in? If he wasn't fed, he would have been served poorly and remain hungry."

When I look at the strong women of my generation, who act staunchly by fighting the dragons that dominate us, I see women who embody both qualities. Women my age have marched in civil rights marches with Martin Luther King. They unequivocally broke with white supremacists in South Africa. I see many Mary and Marthas together who have surrounded the dragon who lives in the pentagon.

The Martha who lives within me will not be superseded or outranked by the Mary within me. In each one of us there should be the young girl that we once were. But the best women I know will no longer accept the separation of the two.

Legends of the middle ages let both Martha and Mary cross the ocean with Jesus' disciples to teach and to preach. In the legends, both Mary and Martha act and dream, do the good work and pray, uniting struggle and reflection and in the process making the world itself more sisterly.