

Fourth Sunday in Lent - March 30, 2025

Numbers 26:33; 27:1–11; Psalm 56:1–13; Acts 18:1–3, 18–20, 24–28; Luke 10:38–42

Hidden Opportunity

1. Not everything is a competition
 - a. You couldn't convince our kids of that, especially the boys
 - i. It was more than just natural sibling dynamics
 - ii. When they were little, but old enough that we weren't demanding they hold our hand in parking lots, they'd run to see who could get to the car first.
 - iii. I wish they had competed in who could keep their room cleaner, but I wasn't so lucky
 - b. There may be other ways in which you've experienced that among family members
 - i. Someone trying to get attention from their parent/grandparent
 - ii. One or more kids trying to outdo one another in school or sports
 - iii. Again, it may feel like some of this is just the nature of having a sibling close in age
 - iv. Yet it could be exhausting trying to manage those dynamics
2. I think biblical scholars for centuries have been unfair in their treatment of Mary and Martha, presenting today's story like a competition between the sisters, even seemingly declaring a winner
 - a. There is also a temptation to make the passage sound like Jesus is picking favorites, but I think we're selling the sisters and Jesus short
 - i. What needs to be said from the start is how remarkable these sisters are
 1. Since a gospel was written with an original audience in mind, the fact that we get the names of both sisters means they were well known among believers
 2. There are many times when we get stories where the characters are barely explained, let alone named
 3. We get details about both of them, and we know their names
 - ii. Secondly, they are both bucking cultural trends, and they seem perfectly at ease doing so
 1. This may be part of why they had become well known
 - b. Let's take Martha first
 - i. In first century Palestine, it would have been unusual for a woman to have owned property independent of a male (husband, father, etc.)
 - ii. In this passage, without making a big deal, we learn simply that Jesus went to a certain town and was welcomed by Martha AT HER HOUSE
 - iii. It is not clear how it came to be her house (inheritance? Widowhood?) but she bucks social norms simply by virtue of being a female property owner
 - iv. And then, what's more, she invites a single man for dinner (along with a small crowd of followers, I'm sure). Again, challenging society norms.
 - v. She was among a select group of women who supported Jesus. Earlier in the gospel (Luke 8:1-3) it says:

- vi. *[Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.*
- vii. Martha was part of a counter-cultural group of female disciples who, with their generosity and hospitality, were making Jesus' ministry possible
- c. Now examine Mary's actions
 - i. We are given less information about Mary, but what we get is crucial
 - ii. She sought to learn from Jesus, be one of his disciples (sitting at someone's feet is an expression that means they are someone's student)
 - iii. There again a woman is breaking with cultural norms, claiming equal time and space as any other person (male or female) trying to follow Jesus
 - iv. In a male-dominated culture she was going against the flow, and seems perfectly at ease doing so.
- d. (and you get a gold star if you're asking yourself: where is Lazarus? Wasn't that their brother? Didn't Jesus raise him from the dead? Right, but that story is in another gospel. We don't see Lazarus here)
- e. And then maybe we can see Jesus' reaction in a new light
 - i. Martha seems to put Jesus in a really tough position: pulling a guest into a family spat, in public no less, forcing Jesus to take a side
 - ii. And then Jesus looks to be also breaking decorum appearing to criticize his host (Martha) and declaring a winner (Mary)
 - iii. But things change if we see Jesus as being welcomed as part of that family, not just any guest.
 - iv. And they change even more if what Jesus is implying to Martha is that
 - 1. Jesus values Martha's hospitality (depends on it, really)
 - 2. and Jesus acknowledges that what she really wants to do is FINISH setting things up so SHE TOO can sit at the feet of Jesus
- 3. There are hidden opportunities to serve, when we go against stereotypes, and when we lean into our strengths even if in conflict with cultural norms
 - a. Lent is a season which challenges us to service, to connect with Jesus in a deeper way, to sit at Jesus' feet with each other, in work AND meditation
 - b. Just consider our week as a congregation:
 - c. Today a 12 year old teaches us about faith and commitment to follow Jesus
 - d. Tuesday we honor one another hosting a meal and studying the scriptures
 - e. Friday eating with neighbors allows us to be in solidarity with one another, and challenge systems which keep people on the margins (Friday)
 - f. Saturday we get into good trouble by coming together with neighbors of all faith traditions or none to speak a prophetic word against government actions which threaten the safety and wellbeing of women and LGBTQ folk, people in poverty, immigrant neighbors, and anyone daring to speak in opposition.
- 4. What else can we do together as we Mary and Martha our way to following Jesus?

Sources:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-3/commentary-on-luke-1038-42-5>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-3/commentary-on-luke-1038-42-3>

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