

“A LETTER TO MARTHA”

Luke 10:38-42

July 22, 2007

The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Dear Martha,

Like so many people, I am acquainted with you only through the stories where your name appears in the gospels of Luke and John. I know that you were the sister of Lazarus, that you and your family were close friends with Jesus. Like your brother and sister, you loved Jesus; you enjoyed his company; and you wanted to serve him. But then there was that unfortunate incident where you were busy serving and your sister Mary was in with the men listening, and of a moment, you became impatient and asked Jesus to make your sister help you. He rebuked you publicly. He told you that you were distracted by many things, and that Mary had made a better choice. I can only imagine how that stung.

Does it make you feel better to know that I—2000 years later—I and countless other women and I hope some men, too, whenever we come to this story in the gospels, we always stub our toe on it. And what I mean by that is that we never get through it cleanly; there's always a moment of shock and unease. In the year 2007, many of us on one level identify more closely with your sister, Mary, than with you. The right of women to sit and listen and talk with men, instead of being always the ones to cook and serve, it is a hard won and, in some places, a still fragile freedom. There is that part of me, and so many others, that wants to cheer your friend Jesus for so decisively opening the doors of theological discourse to women. But as portrayed in Luke's gospel, that affirmation came at a cost, and that cost seems on the surface of it to be a denial of the importance of your loving service in providing comfort and hospitality.

That's where the unease comes. That's where the story does not ring true. Nowhere else in the gospels does Jesus reprimand or do anything but praise those who serve. The story that precedes this in Luke's gospel is one we call the parable of the Good Samaritan. The hero of the tale is not the priest or the Levite—those who live to discuss what it means to be a good neighbor; the hero of the story is the low-life Samaritan who finds a man beaten and robbed and so goes and serves him intimately: bathing him, dressing his wounds, offering the most basic of hospitality. It was Jesus who said to Peter, James, and John that the one who would be the first in the realm of God must instead be last, and the greatest of all must be the servant of all. And behind these words of Jesus, there is the long history going back to Abraham of hospitality as an essential spiritual discipline and grace. How do we know that Abraham and Sarah were worthy of the birth of Isaac, that they deserved the privilege of being the patriarch and matriarch of a great nation? It was because as desert nomads, when three strangers approached, instead of treating them violently or casually, instead Abraham and his wife brought them water to bathe their feet, and bread and meat, and bid them rest in the shade of his family's encampment. Practice hospitality, the scripture tells us, for in being hospitable, some have entertained angels unaware. And God blessed them for all generations.

All this, Martha, was the tradition, the unswerving belief of your Lord and mine, so why the rebuke? Why were you not praised and held out as an example for your hospitable ways? Elisabeth Schussler-

Fiorenza, an eminent theologian of my time, calls the story about you in Luke “inauthentic” because it goes so strongly against the Jesus she has come to see in the Gospels. She believes that this story about you never really happened; that it is actually a creation of the early church, part of the divisive struggle of early Christians about the proper role of women in their new movement. Luke, being a champion of the “womanizing” party of the church, cast this story this way deliberately to confound us, to assert that even as much as Jesus valued hospitality, he valued Christian independence more: Jesus believed that all Christians—male, female, Jew, Greek, slave, free—all needed to be answerable only to God and the Holy Spirit for their vocation, not some predetermined schema of who was capable to do what in the church. Which is great news; but I still can’t pass by your story without feeling uncomfortable. Somehow it doesn’t make it all better to think that you were merely used as a literary figure.

Theologian Henri Nouwen comes at your story from a different angle. He writes of hospitality not just as a theological virtue, but as the essential posture of Christian life. For him, the concept of religious hospitality goes far beyond food, drink, and creature comforts. Christian hospitality involves creating a space that is intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually welcoming, a space that invites all those who enter to freely explore and become whatever they are capable of becoming. Nouwen would point out that all too often, we do better at being truly hospitable to strangers than we do with our own families and others who are close to us. With family and friends, we tend to, both consciously and unconsciously, project our wants, our needs, our insecurities, our issues, until the wide bright room of our welcome becomes instead a narrow ill-lit narrow corridor.

Was that your problem, Martha, that you were more hospitable to your friend than to your sister? That you would provide comfort and openness for him, but not her, and Jesus decided to call you on it? Nouwen is right. It is so easy to limit those we love best, to confine their spirits with weighty intangibles of assumption and obligation, when what we really want to do is give them the best and deepest hospitality that is in us. I know I do it sometimes with my children, and I see others whose relationships with partners, siblings, children, even friends is marred by the grasping that is the antithesis to true hospitality. But again, as in the earlier explanation for Jesus’ reprimand, if your sin was lack of hospitality—which is so universal—why didn’t Jesus broaden his remarks to you to generalities, to include all of us in his indictment?

Last night, Martha, I went on the internet—which I couldn’t possibly begin to explain to a first century person. You can get a lot of information there, all sorts of people offering up their opinions: informed or not, worthy of being considered or not. Will it do your heart good to know that when I checked preaching websites, every one of them registered something between ambivalence and unease about your story. People don’t want you and Mary, hospitality and freedom, to be opposed to each other so we have to choose one or the other as the higher value. That’s what’s hard. The way this story is cast, we who read it feel like we have to choose; but I’m wondering this afternoon if that’s the truth. Luke’s Gospel freezes you, your sister, and Jesus in a moment of tension and vulnerability. You were having a bad night; you responded by whining about your sister. Jesus said something...and then the evening went forward, and then the next day, and the next, and the next. There is freedom; there is hospitality; but above them both is love: the love that forgives and the love that amends; the love especially among family and close friends that accepts the other as imperfect, but loves anyway. We who read this part of

your story need to remember to go from there to John's gospel to the story of the death of your brother Lazarus. You were the one there who ran out to Jesus when you saw him coming and in faith absolute affirmed his power to cure and even to conquer death. Such a stunning witness of discipleship. Maybe there was nothing lost the night of Luke's dinner party, no political or hospitable choice that needed to be made in an absolute sense. Maybe the choice we are supposed to make is to apprehend the tension of the moment, reflect on it, then move on, knowing that life and relationship are fluid, especially among those who care deeply for God and for each other.

It's hard to know the truth from this distance. I wish we could just ask you. But know that you are not forgotten, that your story through the centuries has stimulated all manner of conversation and reflection. There are many who would call themselves your friends.

Sincerely yours,

A Perturbed Pastor