

Stepping Over the Threshold

Luke 10.38-42

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October 21, 2018

When I was a child my sister and I were responsible for doing the dinner dishes. Regularly after dinner she would feign a stomach ache and head to the bathroom, leaving me to wash and dry all the dishes. This infuriated me because I knew she wasn't sick. She was in the bathroom, reading magazines and painting her toenails – having a wonderful time, while I was stuck with all the work in the kitchen. I suspect some of you have had a similar experience because my mother has told me that her younger sister did the same thing. Oh, those little sisters . . .

Well, as much as I want to preach a sermon in honor of Martha, the one left with the work, I cannot. For this story, today's Gospel reading, is not a simple sisterly dispute about who washes dishes and who gets to have fun with the company.

By sitting at Jesus' feet among his disciples, Mary is taking a great risk. She is stepping out of the realm of women and into the realm of men. She is intentionally violating the rules of order and her actions will have consequences. Not only will Mary bring disgrace and dishonor to herself, but her actions will affect her entire family, including Martha, making them all targets of derision, shunning and violence. This story is not a simple sisterly dispute over the dishes. This is a story about intentionally violating the rules of order because the rules of order are not working.

See, In the Ancient Mediterranean world a person's character was their capital. For a man to barter and trade and enter into contracts, it was important that his entire family's character was without fault. This required women, like Mary, to adhere to the traditional rules of order, acting with discretion, restraint and timidity as well as staying away from men. Mary violated these rules. Not only did she enter a space reserved for men and then take a seat among them, as their equal, but she also acted with courage, the hallmark of masculinity, a character trait exclusive to men.

Sitting in Mary's home was Jesus, the man who had been preaching and teaching a new set of rules, rules which redefined and blurred the rigid roles of women and men. Jesus was equipping women to preach and he was inviting men to care for their children. Jesus was encouraging women to speak up for what they needed and he was inviting men to stop talking, to listen and observe. Jesus was encouraging women to aggressively pursue their needs and he was inviting men to back away from fights, to act with humility and grace. Jesus was highly critical of the rules of order which were governing his people because they were not God's rules and they did not lead to life. Mary knew this. So she mustered up all of her courage, put down her dish towel, and took a deep breath as she walked out of the realm of women and into the realm of men, intentionally violating the rules of order in search of a new set of rules, in search of a new life.

Hearing this story now, two thousand years later, we cheer for Mary and her courage. We give thanks for the risks she took, risks which over the course of time have led to and continue to lead to the liberation of women. Hearing this story now, in this community, we find it difficult to comprehend that such a simple action could be so scandalous so dangerous. And yet, and yet . . . the headlines in our papers, the faces on our televisions, and the conversations in our community are highly critical of people who violate the rules of order for the sake of justice and equality. Black Lives Matter, Times Up, Me Too, The Water Protectors, and so on – the courageous people who are intentionally violating the rules of order in search of a new set of rules and new life have been deemed scandalous and their actions have made them targets of derision, shunning, and violence. It is easy for us to applaud Mary's actions for what she is doing because her actions fit our rules of order, but she was not following the rules of the time. She was defying and challenging the rules then, just as so many vilified people and groups are doing today.

Martha's reaction is not surprising given the potential consequences of Mary's actions. Let's be clear here, Martha may have been frustrated about the dishes, but the dishes were not her primary concern. Martha would have never entered a room full of men to complain about dishes. She, like Mary, violated the rules of order because she felt she had no other choice. She needed Mary to come back to the kitchen, to restore order in the home, and she needed Jesus' help doing that.

Shortly after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, a video clip of a mother retrieving her teenaged son from a Black Lives Matter rally was posted to the web and went viral. The video went viral because the mother hit her son upside the head, numerous times, and then grabbed him by the collar and pulled him to the car while yelling, "What do you think you are doing? Are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

I suspect Martha said something similar to Mary while they were still in the kitchen. Like the mother of that teenage boy, it's not that Martha didn't recognize the significant injustices weighing on their community and their family. Martha knew full well what was going on. Her knowledge of the current conditions made her even more protective of Mary and the family. "Send her back in here to do the dishes," is a coded message for "What do you think your doing? Are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

It's ironic that Martha poses this frustration to Jesus, of all people. Preventing his death was not really of concern to him. And he responds accordingly. "Martha, Martha, you are focused on the wrong thing. You are distracted from what is most important." Then he goes on to say, "Mary has chosen for herself the better part." The English translation leaves out the "for herself," which is unfortunate, because these two words are critically important to the story. Not only does Jesus welcome Mary into the community of disciples he affirms her for making a decision for herself. Women were not allowed to make decisions for themselves. Their actions, their behaviors, were rigidly defined by the men in the household and the rules of order. But Mary said, "To hell with all of these rules, rules which are suffocating me and the people in my community. I'd rather die than live this like." And Jesus says, "Yes!"

It's notable that this story does not take place in the Temple or Synagogue. Most of Jesus' ministry in fact, did not take place in the Temple or Synagogue. With the exception of a few situations, which all ended in conflict, Jesus' ministry existed in the outdoors and people's homes. I suspect Mary, with her heavy heart, went to the Synagogue, regularly, searching for answers, direction and support. As the Torah was read, she heard of a God who understood her plight and who offered her a new way of life. Yet she did not experience this in the Synagogue, among God's gathered people. Instead, she found it outside the church, she found it in her home among a community of people centered around Jesus. This group of people, these boundary blurrers, men who were committed to non-violence and women who acted with courage, people who violated the traditional rules of order because they were not God's rules, these people who were not welcome in the Synagogue, they were the church. 2000 years ago they reclaimed what it meant to be worshippers of God and we are their heirs.

So, how are we, as the church, a community centered in Jesus, honoring our roots and our mission? I ask you this, in all sincerity, as one who struggles with you, are we, are you, am I more committed to blurring boundaries or upholding the traditional rules of order? Do I, do you, do we have the courage to walk out of the realm of safety and into the realm of the God, knowing full-well our actions may make us targets of derision, shunning and violence? Do we have the courage or are we more comfortable staying in the kitchen, where the risks are fewer? As we vision together for the future of this congregation, let us be courageous and faithful in our vision. Let us imagine a congregation that says, like Mary "To hell with the rules we are told to follow. They are suffocating this congregation and the Church. It is time for us to take faithful risks, stepping over the threshold from where we are into where Jesus is inviting us to be."

Today's story ends abruptly. We aren't told what happens next. We don't know how Mary or Martha's lives are changed by this experience. We hear nothing about them again in Gospel of Luke. All we can do is speculate about what happened next. Based upon who I know Jesus Christ to be, I imagine that the next few minutes went like this:

Martha, took her fury, her fear, and her sorrow, and walked back to the kitchen, where she continued to prepare food for the guests. A few minutes later, Jesus, who was not concerned about human made boundaries, appeared in the kitchen, the realm of women, and invited her to stop working and come sit with him. "Just for the afternoon," he said. "I know your frightened, so I'm only asking you to try. Please sit with me for the afternoon, that's all I ask, nothing more. . . And when the afternoon is over, when the sun begins it's descent, **we'll** go back to kitchen, to prepare the food and wash the dishes together."

AMEN