

Scripture

Genesis 18:1-15

Michele Lawler

In this passage, Abraham and Sarah hear again the promise of a son, first spoken of in Gen 15. Much has happened since those early days, including the birth of Ishmael through the slave Hagar. The story reveals the scandal and difficulty of faith. Abraham and Sarah have long lived with ‘barrenness’, well into old age, so this promise does not meet with receptive hope but in resistant disbelief. The question posed by the angel “is anything too hard for God” is a perpetual question for those who would entrust themselves to God.

¹ The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on — since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, “Make ready quickly three measures^[e] of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰ Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?” ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

Lazarus, Mary and Martha are well-known characters in most churches, yet they appear only here and in the gospel of John. What is known is that they were good friends and disciples of Jesus. They readily received him in their home, which in the ancient near east made Jesus a part of their clan. Here we see the struggle of faith – to serve and to hear are both valid expressions of love. Is there a need for balance, or something more?

³⁸ Now as they (Jesus and his disciples) went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving; so she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; ⁴² one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

Sermon

"It's All Too Much"

How has your week been? Have you had a chance to relax at all? I hope you have, especially given all the work we have needed to do, and will need to do in the coming weeks. Sometimes taking a break just doesn't seem possible, if not down-right unrealistic.

So, when we heard our Scripture reading today it may have hit us hard. We know what it is like to be Martha, don't we? And in this story it can feel like Martha gets a bad rap. After all, she is doing the one thing expected of all people in ancient Israel; she is extending hospitality to a traveler, in fact, a good many travelers. Jesus and his crew are headed to Jerusalem, and when they make it as far as Bethany, just a few miles from Jerusalem, Martha opens her home to him (and to all of them) for respite and refreshment.

How long they would stay, we don't know. But we do know that having guests in your home calls for significant hospitality. And ladies, you know the work-load. It's not just ordering pizza and beer, especially if it is Jesus you are welcoming. You know too that you want, no you need, a lot of help. Which is where things get sticky in today's story. Martha has a sister, maybe a younger sister, who should, by all rights, be working just as hard as Martha. And where is she? Well, scripture tells us she settled herself down right in front of Jesus; happy to be listening to his words, and probably chatting it up too. Which, by the way, is a terrible thing in her culture. No woman had the right to enter

‘men’s territory’ of learning and discussing the things of God. But there she is, like one of Jesus’ guys, like a disciple even! Right at home with Jesus.

I can’t help but wonder what the guys think? But we know what Martha felt. Frustrated, annoyed, beside herself. I imagine she stood in the doorway to the living room, wagging her finger and glaring at Mary, trying to get her attention and her help – to no avail. So then, it seemed she just had to step it up. Jesus was the only one now who could do anything about it. After all, he is the honored guest and the Rabboni. He has the right to dismiss Mary from his ‘table talk’. Only he doesn’t.

We can almost hear him chiding Martha, rather than Mary. “Martha, Martha, Martha” You are so worried about nothing. Ouch! Only, maybe that wasn’t his tone of voice. Maybe Jesus wasn’t upset by Martha any more than he was disturbed by Mary’s presence. Maybe his words to Martha were not a rebuke, but an invitation. Martha? Martha, where are thou? Martha, Martha you really are burdened and disturbed by all these things. But really, only one thing is essential in all this, one centering thing that keeps all things functioning properly. Mary has perceived it and chosen the good part, and it won’t be taken away from her.

I wonder if that caught Martha’s distracted attention. I wonder if it settled her fraught spirit? I also wonder if she threw the apron at Jesus and plopped herself down, with the pot on the stove and the dishes in the sink. I wonder too, how you are hearing this story now; how I have been hearing this story all week. And what are we going to do about it? Because, in reality, churches don’t exist without a whole lot of Marthas (and Michaels) working in the background, just so some of us can sit and listen to Jesus’ words, at least for an hour. What would all us listeners do after worship without some coffee and goodies waiting in the lounge. We all know just how important that is, don’t we?

But what if this story is not meant to create a division between serving and learning? What if discipleship is not either/or but both/and? Martha and Mary are both in the house. Both are welcoming Jesus, and both are attending to Jesus. Maybe discipleship is about the lesson we heard, yet again, last week. “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole being, and your neighbor as yourself”. Perhaps discipleship is both ‘go and do’ and ‘sit and listen.’

Perhaps, discipleship is about all of life – lived in harmony, which, by the way is different than ‘a balanced life’. We will have weeks when ‘Martha’ is all we can manage because, well, life happens. And then there are weeks (I hope) where all we focus on is ‘Mary’, because we really, really need that ‘one good thing’. And perhaps the wisdom of Jesus, the word of Jesus, is for us to know who we are, how we are, and why we are; and then choose how to live in the moment.

And most important of all, whether we are ‘Marthas’ or ‘Marys’, or just plain me, Jesus is under our roof. And I, personally, am glad to have him here. Aren’t you? Amen.

***Hymn**

“Grant us Wisdom”

NCH 510

Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People

Loving God, thank you for your faithful presence with us wherever and however we are. Thank you for Christ’s words of truth and your Spirit’s way of wisdom. We long, O God, for the grace that accompanies our discipleship, and so we come to you now with our gratitude and our needs.

We pray for your church and for this congregation. May we learn the art of attending to Christ’s presence with us. Help us to know, not just the way to serve, but the way of learning as well, so that our witness may be complete, revealing to the world the fullness of your grace.

We pray for our world and all its leaders. May they find the wisdom, guidance and refreshment they need as they labor to establish your ways of justice and peace. We pray also for all who are suffering today. May the ill know your healing touch, the sorrowful your tender presence and the poor your abundant aid. We especially lift up... and we thank you for...

We praise you, wondrous God, for all your goodness to us through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

The Lord’s Prayer

Choral Response

“Remember Me”

Offering

Invitation: God is always gracious and generous toward us. We are invited into God’s presence for our strengthening and called into the world for God’s service. Our offerings give form to our discipleship. Let us give with gratitude.

Offertory Music

“Wondrous Love.” Trad. arr. Tedd Smith

Doxology

Prayer: God of blessing, may our offering be an expression of our faith and our love. We commit them to your purpose of bringing all peoples the wholeness of life and peace. To this end we offer ourselves with these gifts, to your glory. Amen.

* **Hymn** “Go, My Children” NCH 82

***Common Commission**

Let us go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all persons, loving and serving the Lord, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

*** Benediction**

Go now into the world

Doing justice, practicing kindness, and walking humbly with your God
Micah 6:8 adj.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

Postlude “God Be with You,” from E. Ashford’s Hymn Voluntaries.

music provided by Chris Harris and Lynne Walker