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By Amy Chatelaine

Introduction

The story of Martha and Mary comes at the beginning of a lengthy account of Jesus's journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:27). Much of the journey involves detailed instruction in discipleship, which mostly takes place over a shared meal. Lessons in hospitality – both the giving and receiving – are a central focus throughout Luke's gospel, with a distinctive emphasis on the table. You could consider the story of Martha and Mary as a closer look at how that table is set. This week's gospel text offers an orientation to the practice of hospitality by clarifying its essence; while we know from the parable of the Good Samaritan that acts of service are a requirement of neighborliness, Jesus's engagement with Martha's anxiety teaches us that in order to extend hospitality to another, we must first learn to do so to ourselves.

This text also depicts how anxiety can often be an underlying source of conflict, a reality many readers will find easy to relate to. How might our anxiety teach us something about the tasks, the agendas, the causes, the expectations we feel beholden to? What is their source? Are they life-giving, or wearing us down to the point of exhaustion and even conflict? When read through the lens of conflict, this story gives us the opportunity to expand our compassion toward self and others, and thus receive more fully the presence of Christ in our midst.

Text

Luke 10:38–42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Comment

“In order to be fully present to another, it is essential to be fully present to oneself.” This was the first piece of wisdom I received during orientation for my year with Joseph’s House, where I served as a full-time volunteer after graduating from college. Founded in 1990 during the AIDS crisis in Washington, DC, Joseph’s House is a hospice for men and women with late-stage AIDS or terminal cancer. Many of the residents cross the front porch of the brick house burdened by a history of housing instability, chemical dependency, mental illness, and the stigma attached to any number of life-diminishing labels given by society. The end-of-life care provided at Joseph’s House runs contrary to medical models where “fixing” and “curing” are central to the healing practice. At Joseph’s House, “healing” has much more to do with the practice of hospitality and presence.

It wasn’t long before I understood the difficulty of embodying that orienting piece of wisdom. As a resident care aide, my tasks were multiple: preparing community meals, giving rides to appointments, sorting medications, laundering bedsheets, assisting with bathing, and keeping the coffee hot and the sweet tea cold. A few weeks into my time with Joseph’s House, I recognized that sitting was the hardest part of my day. Whether on the front porch or at the bedside, I would sit down to “be present” with a resident and my anxiety would run in a hundred different directions. Does she have everything she needs? Should I ask her if she wants coffee, *again*? Should I just leave and get it? He’s not saying anything; is he annoyed that I’m here? What can I say to help ease his pain? Is watching another episode of this daytime crime show with her what I’m supposed to be *doing* right now? My task-distracted mind often looked with hostility upon my stationary body. I was a house divided, and soon found myself anxious, exhausted, and detached.

As I enter into this week’s text, I am greeted at the door by an all-too-familiar swirl of distraction and anxiety. Martha welcomes Jesus into her home, but it is soon clear that she is not really present. She literally drops out of the scene as the center of focus shifts to her sister Mary at the feet of Jesus. Ironically, it is the tasks involved in hosting that get in the way of Martha being attentive to her guest. These tasks likely involved preparing a meal, and we can perhaps imagine sounds of bowls clanging, knives chopping, and feet scurrying to and fro as Martha goes about her harried work. If this isn’t enough to drown out the sound of Jesus’s words to Mary (which even the author leaves out entirely, perhaps for literary effect), what anxious inner dialogue might we imagine pulling her away from being present with Jesus?

In Luke’s gospel, anxiety is the state of being pulled in different directions, of being pulled apart. The number of times it is mentioned in Luke makes clear that Jesus recognizes both its proclivity and its destructiveness. Anxiety is a threat to discipleship. It is an inner conflict that creates a sense of separation from the disciples’ call to public ministry (12:11–12) and from the promise that God understands their deepest needs and will provide (12:22–31). And as we see with Martha, anxiety can even sabotage our best efforts to be present to Christ in our midst.

It is Jesus’s response to Martha that encourages me to welcome her anxiety (and my own!) with compassion and curiosity. Does it have something to teach us?

Martha is upset because Mary is not where she should be, or doing what she thinks is needed. From where do these expectations arise? The world of Martha and Mary was one in which the work involved in preparing the home to receive company largely falls on women. Mary’s place at Jesus’s feet is outside the cultural norm. Further, it is often the place assumed by men receiving religious instruction, a realm not accessible to women. In sharp contrast to Martha, Mary is grounded in this space, despite it not being where society says she “should” be.

And it is Mary’s choice that Jesus names as “good.” The NRSV translation of this passage interprets Jesus’s words as “Mary has chosen the *better* part” (10:42). There is risk here in interpreting this passage as drawing comparisons between

approaches to hospitality, ministry, and peacemaking, pitting works of service against a more scholarly or contemplative life. Luke is not portraying Jesus as denouncing works of service, which he just lifted up in the parable of the Good Samaritan in the preceding passage. A more accurate translation would designate Mary's choice as "the *good* part." This "good" finds its equivalent in the fertility of soil or fruit-bearing tree (Luke 8). It is the choice to "centre down," and to be present to ourselves and to Christ in our midst. It says more about the quality of presence than the parameters of action.

Gradually, and through persistent and patient encouragement from my mentors at Joseph's House, I began to be more present to my anxious distraction. Practices like Centering Prayer and the Welcoming Prayer helped me locate the source of my anxiety, which was often in expectations that assumed a host/guest, benefactor/beneficiary, provider/patient dichotomy. Presence exposed and flattened power differentials and helped us see one another past our acquired positions and labels. It was then that healing happened.

Over the years, I have learned that practices of presence are vital to the work of peace and reconciliation as well. It requires just as much (if not more) attention to the places of tension and division in our inner life as to the fractures of our world. This passage invites us to choose to be held in the steadfast presence of our perennial Guest and Host, who assures us that the decision to settle down and centre down is always available to us, and might just be what we ultimately need to bear fruit in this work.

Response

May the questions posed below by Howard Washington Thurman, African American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader, be an invitation in your ongoing engagement with this text throughout the week:

"How Good to Center Down"

How good it is to centre down!
To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
Our spirits resound with clashing, with noisy silences,
While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.
With full intensity we seek, ere thicket passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;
A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.
We look at ourselves in this waiting moment—the kinds of people we are.
The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives?—what are the motives that order our days?
What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go? Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused? For what end do we make sacrifices?
Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?
What do I hate most in life and to what am I true? Over and over the questions beat upon the waiting moment.
As we listen, floating up through all of the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—
A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.
It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered,
Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round
With the peace of the Eternal in our step.
How good it is to center down!

Prayer

The Welcoming Prayer
Father Thomas Keating

Welcome, welcome, welcome.
I welcome everything that comes to me in this moment,
because I know it is for my healing.
I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions,
persons, situations, and conditions.
I let go of my desire for security.
I let go of my desire for approval.
I let go of my desire for control.
I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition,
person, or myself.
I open to the love and presence of God
and the healing action and grace within.

Amen.