

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 18 July 2010, Proper 11 in lectionary year C. To God be the glory.*

The only church I know that's named for Martha and Mary is in suburban Minneapolis. I've never been there, but when I hear the story from scripture I think about that church named for both of these women. I bet they're a really conflicted church!

The names themselves--Martha & Mary--don't need any introduction. We immediately conjure up the dichotomy of Martha the doer, and Mary the contemplative, and any sermons we hear or we preach fall into place accordingly. The whole thing, in Luke's telling, is only 5 verses, and yet the story has justified any number of arguments which seem to pit the vocations of church folk, especially women, against each other.

Let's see what's here. Last week you'll recall that our gospel reading was the story of the Good Samaritan, and since we're reading from Luke pretty much in-course, the first thing we should notice is that that story, the Good Samaritan, occurs immediately before this story about Mary and Martha. Among other subjects, we could say it was a story about hospitality, showing concern for our neighbor. Remember where Jesus is going? To Jerusalem, and so he relies on the hospitality of friends, and throughout this travelogue of Luke's stories we're going to hear more little bits about hospitality, sometimes they'll be told from the perspective of *receiving* other times we'll be given a perspective of *giving* hospitality.

Jesus is usually portrayed to be on the receiving end of people's hospitality, but he's not always well-mannered. He often criticizes his host, as well as the other guests. I'm defensive of Martha, and somewhat offended by Jesus' who chastises her. But it's noteworthy that I don't get defensive of the pharisee, with whom Jesus did the very same thing. The plain truth is that sometimes what Jesus says unsettles us. When people are on a mission they can come across as a little one-tracked.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus' mission is to point to the kingdom of God. It takes him 10 chapters to get to Jerusalem, and on the way he's consistently enlarging the circle, always showing regard for the ones who are on the margins, and never missing a chance to say that God's good grace is for everybody. That's Jesus mission, to point to the kingdom of God. What's ours? I mean, the Church of the Epiphany's?

I don't pretend to know the answer, but already in these first months I have a sense from you that hospitality and welcome might be among the pillars of our future mission. I've heard from many of you about what brought you here, what you were looking for, and what made you stay. Your stories--about which I long to hear even more--remind me that God is in this place, and that God is working in us to create a spiritual community grounded in the life and work of Jesus.

Yet I wonder about how we will strengthen our hospitality? If you're unsure, memorize this story about Martha and Mary, and every other story which Jesus tells, with a particular set of headphones, only one podcast. Call it a wide welcome to all who enter these doors.

You already do this. Two Sundays ago I watched one among us march right up to a couple and say "Good morning, I don't think I've met you." Last Sunday I heard another one of you say, "Here, let me show you the guest book" and you took her to the guest book. Since we ran out of punch three Sundays in a row, I suggested this week that we put out a little more summer punch, and within a few hours several of you stepped up to make that happen. We need to channel the care and diligence of Martha, every single one of us. It's called hospitality.

In our mission to proclaim the kingdom of God in this parish we'll need also to channel Mary's hospitality. It won't be enough to say "all are welcome here." Notice Mary. Jesus shows up at the door and she stops to listen to him. Maybe she knew what we know...that he's on his way to Jerusalem. His mission was getting harder, maybe the strain was greater, and maybe Mary picked up on all that; maybe not. But she did indeed take time to listen and to find out where he was in his life, and to find out what his needs were.

We can throw the best party at Epiphany, every Sunday morning. We can greet people at the door, have beautiful flowers, set the table with gorgeous silver, get and give outstanding music, and yet guests can still leave feeling as though things were all on the surface. All of us have been to dinners with great food, and great company, but not-so-good hospitality. If we leave a party without getting to know anyone, or with a sense that nobody really wanted to get to know us, it's not a great party.

The really excellent churches understand that most people want very little in life, except to be listened to, to be heard, to be told that someone cares about us, and that our gifts are valued and needed. Basically, to hear the good news that we're loved and that we're not alone, that Christ Jesus loves us and that God has more in store for us tomorrow than we have been able to discover today. When we go the extra step to learn someone's name, it says that we care, and that as a member of the church, an ambassador of Christ and a representative of God because of your baptism--it says to that person that God cares. We don't need to be called the Church of Saints Martha and Mary. We can be who we are, the Epiphany in Winchester, and we can be the most hospitable church you know.

