

Sermon Proper 11 Year C

[RCL] Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Passionate Spirituality

It's a brief story, and Jesus delivers the punch line: "Martha, Martha," he tells his hostess. "You are worried and distracted about many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken from her."

Everything, therefore, hangs on the one thing that Jesus mentions, the one thing that Mary has chosen and apparently her sister, Martha, has not.

At first it looks as though the one thing that is necessary is to sit at Jesus' feet, to assume a disciple's posture; this over even something so useful as bustling about to make your guests feel at home.

It is even possible to set up the two sisters Martha and Mary as examples of different vocations. Mary the contemplative, lucky one that she is can devote herself to prayer, to spiritual practice. Martha, on the other hand, seems like the rest of us, who struggle with the demands of life in the world, praying on the run, if at all.

The distinction between Mary and Martha, contemplation and action, prayer and service, comes across as a tidy distinction. For that reason alone it should be treated as suspect. Life is rarely neat. Issues of faith are rarely simple.

No, something more is involved here. The story of Jesus as a guest in the home of these women does not justify dividing believers into two classes: spiritual aristocrats and the rest of us. Instead, it challenges all of us, and does so in a way that need not separate us from each other.

What makes Mary of Bethany an example is not that she sits at the feet of Jesus. What makes her sister Martha need her example is not that she labors to accommodate others. What's at stake lies elsewhere. A contemporary name for it is passionate spirituality.

Passionate spirituality takes many forms. It does not have to be: emotional rather than reasonable, extroverted rather than introverted, or contemporary rather than traditional. What makes someone's spirituality passionate is prayer, enthusiasm, and boldness. People of passionate spirituality live committed lives. They practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm. Passionate spirituality can spill out through service or study or devotion. It can be apparent in whatever one does.

The problem with Martha is not her hospitality. It is how she does not let her hospitality become a channel for a spirituality marked by passion. Instead, she becomes distracted and complains to Jesus about her sister rather than speaking directly to her sister. While Mary listens to Jesus, Martha presumes to tell him what he must do. It appears that Martha is driven by duty rather than

delight. She may be an effective organizer, a great cook, conscientious in all that she does, but she is simply responsible, not inspired, even on the day when Jesus himself comes to dinner. She may even be busy and anxious in an effort not to have to hear what Jesus is saying.

What makes Mary an example is not the simple fact that she listens to Jesus, but that she does so in a way that is passionate and bold. Jesus does not so much commend her behavior as the spirit behind it.

Mary chooses to take some risks. She takes the chance of upsetting her sister: Mary's not helping, she's listening. She also risks upsetting plenty of people because she takes the role of disciple, sitting at the teacher's feet. This is not something women in her society do. It's a role reserved for men. Still, that's where she places herself, or rather, where the Spirit leads her.

So, somebody may say, I buy into what you call passionate spirituality. I recognize it as 'the way to go' for Christian people. Furthermore I recognize that passionate spirituality does not have to be emotional rather than reasonable, extraverted rather than introverted, or contemporary rather than traditional. How then does it come about?

Passionate spirituality is more God's gift than it is anything we do. It's more for us to welcome than for us to achieve. It results from a series of **conversions**.

Each of us is called repeatedly, invited to turn away from something and toward something else. The conversions that occur in our lives may cause us to turn toward God, toward Christ, toward the Church, toward the poor, toward a life of prayer, toward a certain form of service, toward the world that God loves. These conversions and still others can happen to us in any sort of order, and any of them can occur more than once.

Each of us is invited many times to turn in a new direction. Passionate spirituality happens again and again when we answer these calls and enter into new dimensions of the great gift of life. We cannot make these calls happen. But we can leave ourselves undefended so that we can hear such a call when it does sound forth. Spiritual practices, properly understood, are to a large degree a form of listening.

In this way, prayer, scripture, receiving communion, helping those in need, going on a retreat, these practices and many others are ways for us, like Mary, to sit at Jesus' feet as a disciple and hear what he wants to tell us.

It was risky for Mary to sit as a disciple at the feet of Jesus in a culture that did not leave room for women to do such a thing.

We may find it risky, for all sorts of reasons, some of them self-imposed, to undertake spiritual practices in a receptive way, to answer the call to continuing conversion, to become aflame with passionate spirituality or what Jesus calls the one thing necessary. We may, after all, find ourselves taken to unexpected places.

Passionate spirituality took a biblical farm hand named Amos away from the tending of sycamore trees and made him into a prophet of God. He responded to his call.

Passionate spirituality took a slave from Maryland's Eastern Shore named Harriet Tubman and made her into the Moses of her people. She responded to her call.

Passionate spirituality took Oscar Romero, a conventional cleric from the tortured country of El Salvador and made him into a voice for the voiceless. He responded to his call.

Each of these, and countless others, was taken to some unexpected place due to embracing the one thing necessary. And each of them would say to us the journey was worth the cost, that it was a flight on eagles' wings.

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