

Who Runs the World?
International Day of the Girl Child
Chapel Service
October 11, 2017
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To say the least, I feel conflicting emotions whenever I read Luke's account of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha. To be honest, it downright drives me crazy. But then, the Scripture passages I am drawn to the most always do. It is not so much the story itself, what it says, or more importantly, what it doesn't say. No, it is what we so often do with the story that pains me.

The story of Mary and Martha is an easy one to contain, to strip down to the bare bones, so that we can move on to the more important stuff of the gospel. There doesn't seem to be much to it, really. If anything, it appears to affirm women in their choice to leave the kitchen for a while and go to where the action really is. Most of the time we are forced to choose between Mary and Martha. Usually Martha gets the worst of the inevitable judgement. Why can't she stop worrying long enough to see what is really important? Why does she allow herself to be distracted at so important a time? Why doesn't she make the right choice, like Mary? Sometimes we are a little more charitable toward Martha. But generally Martha does not fare well in this story.

Yet such conclusions leave me wanting. If this is just a simple story about making the right choice about discipleship - Mary makes it and Martha does not - I, too, would move hurriedly past this story, on to something more filling. But I suspect there is more to the story. So often I find that the silences to which the Scripture points speak louder and more powerfully than the text itself, and this, for me, is especially true when women appear in the Bible. Rachel Brownstein, a professor of English literature, has noted that often women are defined by being placed in opposition to each other, something that happens often in Scripture. It is, as she describes it, part of the "weird need to say at once that women are all the same and that there are two opposite kinds of women." Still, I believe that truth whispers around the edges of the story.

I refuse to choose between Mary and Martha. It is not a choice I find real or true. Something is missing in such a choice. I want to hear the whole story, get a better sense of the full context of the lives of these two women. Their story, for me, is painful when taken out of context, when deeper questions go unasked. Writer Susan Sontag once remarked that "the only interesting answers are the ones that destroy the questions." I find myself wanting to break this story open, so that its fullness begins to emerge. I want to know, what really distracts Martha? What really hurts Martha? Is it just the fact that she gets stuck with the dishes? Or is there something more here?

And what about Mary? Was it really so easy for her to take a place where the men were gathered, to listen to the rabbi speak? Isn't she terrified to go and sit among them, in the presence of a teacher, where it was against all custom for her to be?

I found the account of Mary and Martha to be a touchstone for me during and after my experience at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

During one of the plenary sessions I attended, a speaker concluded her words by declaring, "Remove the brackets - we cannot live without our lives!" Those words echoed in my head for days, along with the phrase that I saw emblazoned on banners almost everywhere we went - "Women's rights are human rights." We cannot without our lives. Women's rights are human rights. On one level, such statements seem so obvious and self-evident as to sound almost nonsensical when spoken aloud. Yet the reality is that it wasn't until 1993, only 3 years ago, that the U.N. officially adopted the concept that women's rights are human rights.

In Beijing, I gained a deeper sense of the importance of making visible fundamental truths. And I came to understand, in new ways, how radical and daring an act it is to make such truths visible. It is something that continually challenges me as I think about my own life and my own choices.

For me, one of the most powerful moments at the conference came during a march held in resistance to violence against women. As evening fell, women streamed into a street in the small town of Huairou that had by now become the major thoroughfare for tens of thousands of women attending the Non-Governmental Forum. We made our way slowly down the street, some women joining hands, many holding candles and pictures of women who had been killed in worker movements, women who had been killed and systematically raped in wars declared

and undeclared, women who had suffered violence at the hands of husbands or other relatives, women who had been killed in their attempts to resist sexual exploitation and violence. Women marched with a thousand different stories and thousands more carried in each heart. When we reached the main highway bisecting the town, women sat down in the street. A voice began singing "We Shall Overcome," the song growing in strength as other voices joined, adding different languages. I realized that for many of the women there, it was the first time that they had been visible in their resistance. Some had never before participated in such a public demonstration because it had never been safe - for many, it still wasn't, for there was always the threat of reprisal when they returned home. I was struck by the power of such a simple act - the power of sitting down in the middle of a side street in a rural Chinese town. Each woman there was like a whisper of truth shouting in the face of deadly distortions that lead to almost unimaginable acts of violence and hate.

In a way no words could express more powerfully, women literally claimed their ground and made their reality visible. It is, I believe the same audacious faith that led Mary to sit at Jesus' feet. I marvel at Mary and I wonder, for the text scarcely hints at, what it took for her to take her place there. Wasn't she scared to death? Was she trying desperately not to show it? You know, like when you act with a certain boldness that directly parallels the degree of fear you feel, but you know you can do nothing else? Because there is no place to go back to, not really. Did Mary act with fear-filled boldness to convince herself at the core of her being that she did have a place, a right to be? And did it scare her even more that Jesus not only didn't dismiss her, but told her she had chosen the better part? For when you have been invisible for so long, becoming visible is a daring act! As Audre Lorde has said, "we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live" - it is what makes us most vulnerable, and it is also the source of our greatest strength.

It seems to me that, first and foremost, Mary and Martha want to be taken seriously, want to be listened to, want to be visible. The truth is, in that time and place, neither Mary nor Martha was really meant to survive, not according to the world as it is. In that time they were women without a place, outside defined boundaries and acceptable definitions. I think they knew that. I think Jesus knew it too. I think Jesus didn't want either Mary or Martha to be distracted from making a choice that would say yes to their ~~survival~~. *survival.*

I believe Jesus wanted to destroy the old questions, the old categories, the old compartments that kept both Mary and Martha from God's healing power. And despite progress we may have made, there is so much that confines girls and women around the world, so many false boundaries and definitions.

It is long past time for policies and governance, both domestically and worldwide, to catch up to what women and girls know. We know that when girls are protected from gender-based violence, when they have equal access to education and health care, families thrive, communities thrive, nations thrive. We know that when girls grow up and have an empowered space in conflict resolution, peace negotiations and development projects, everyone benefits.

and governance

It is time for us to be daring in our imagination about the lives and possibilities for girls and women around the world. It could change the world. While in Beijing, I listened to a panel on global governance, and one of the participants noted, "It is not enough for women to simply claim power. We are challenged to transform the nature of power itself. For what benefit is it, she pointed out, to gain access to a room we have long been denied access to, only to find that the furniture wasn't made to fit us?"

So, Just imagine - who runs the world? Girls!