

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 7.11.16

Scripture: Colossians 1:15-29

Luke 11:38-42

It's been a bad week for our society. We've watched as two more black men die at the hands of police officers for no discernable reason — Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. Then a peaceful march, staged as a community's statement against such authorized — and racist — use of force, was interrupted by a sniper who shot and killed five police officers, and shot and wounded four others. This, it seems, was retaliatory. This was, perhaps, about evening the score.

I can't imagine taking up arms to do such a thing. I can't imagine planning, and practicing for, such a hateful act. But, boy, can I imagine wanting to get even as a way of getting justice, to give someone a taste of their own medicine.

I think we all can.

It wouldn't seem this little gospel lesson of manners has much to say about the big stories of our day — or of any day: this little household drama unfolding between a pair of sisters.

Maybe you know it well; maybe you know this pair of sisters. They were friends of Jesus, it seems: these two, Martha and Mary. Consider that Jesus seems comfortable in their home and their company. Consider also that, in most instances when Jesus has been received into, and served in, someone's home, the hosts and other members of the household are unnamed in the telling of it, as are most of the people encountered along his way. But these two hosts and householders and sisters *are* named, which suggests a certain significance, even a certain level of intimacy.

I see implied friendship also in Martha's appealing to Jesus of her begrudged sense that something unjust is happening in her doing all the tasks of hospitality while Mary takes the privileged position of learning at Jesus' feet. After all, this was a breach of the conventions of hospitality. You don't rope your guest into your private, family grievances — not unless your guest is a trusted family friend.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things," he said gently, or fondly, or impatiently, or...how?

Some biblical scholars (Brook George, Matt Skinner) have thought Jesus a proto-feminist for his not merely allowing but *endorsing* Mary's not conforming to the strict expectations of what a woman should be doing (and what she *shouldn't* be doing). Household tasks, cooking and cleaning, serving and clearing things away: these are how a woman should occupy herself, not learning from and listening to so great a teacher, or really any teacher. Martha conformed to gender expectations, even though she apparently resented doing so; Mary defied gender expectations and seems to have felt liberated by this; and Jesus approved of Mary's defiance while appearing to demean Martha further for her obedience, for her conformity.

And this has been regarded as proto-feminist.

I don't see it that way.

First of all, to demean a woman for conforming to her given role is still to cast judgment on a woman for what she has chosen to do. Forget that this "choice" might have been coerced and so wouldn't actually have been a choice. Forget that, and just notice that to demean a woman for what choices she's made undercuts the feminist project as I understand it—which is to let women freely choose, to the same degree that men can, what they want to do and how they're going to live.

Second of all, to pit one woman against another based on how each behaves is to reenergize a dynamic that is about as anti-feminist as can be.

Third of all, and most fundamentally, I just don't think this story is about gender roles. The fact that this story involves women leads many to think it is. But men are just as gendered as women are. Yet stories that involve men we don't generally assume to be all about gender. The fact that sons of Zebedee, James and John, when called to be disciples to Jesus, left their nets and boat to follow, and that their father, Zebedee, presumably stayed with his work as a fisherman isn't something we claim to be about male gender roles—how James and John defied them and their father conformed. So why must we assume stories that involve women are all about gender, or even somewhat about gender?

Maybe gender just wasn't all that important to Jesus. And maybe this is partly what made him so radically human. That he interacted with each human he encountered as if each were as fully human as he was: maybe this is one expression of his being both fully human and fully divine.

Of course, before feminism was a consideration as regards the Bible, people took this story to be about Jesus giving primacy to the act of worship over and against the tasks of hospitality and otherwise daily living. But then others would point out that these two aren't so easily separated. Worship only happens if someone has cleaned the communion cups following a congregation's last use of them or tuned the piano or made pew cushions so people might actually come and somewhat comfortably sit.

Speaking pragmatically as a pastor, if you preach the text this way—that sitting in worship is “choosing the better part” than doing the work convention and necessity dictate—then I imagine you're setting yourself up for a season of resentments: the deacons, who so dutifully clean and prepare, now full of resentment as regards the people who just show up on Sunday morning thinking that “they've chosen the better part,” and those same people then resenting being resented by those busybody deacons who think they're so great.

But, see, Jesus didn't say Mary chose the better part in her having chosen to sit at his feet and listen to what he said. He merely said she'd chosen the better part: “...there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

When we were in Prague, we Goodmans went to the Communism Museum, an apartment-sized five rooms that walks you through the inception of the idea Communism with Marx & Engels, its revolutionary enactment in Russia with Lenin and Trotsky and Stalin, its growing forcefulness and militancy, its reliance on propaganda and corruption and terror and imprisonment, and eventually its weakening and collapse.

The years under Communist rule were an unhappy time for the Czech people, yoked as they were with the Slovaks, with whom they had no prior affinity, for whom they'd felt but mild pity and even contempt. As soon as they could, they uncoupled themselves—Czechoslovakia undergoing a so-called “velvet divorce” to become the Czech Republic and Slovakia—and the Czechs felt pretty sure they'd return to being the more successful small nation of the two.

That is hasn't played out that way has fueled a lot of resentment among the Czech people—resentment for the Slovaks, for the Euro Zone countries of which they've not managed to become one due to their still weak economy, and for anyone who seems to have money like, say, tourists, especially American tourists. Don't get me wrong: I loved Prague, it just very clearly didn't love me.

Except for the clerk at the Communism Museum. She seemed to like that we liked the dark humor on display in their having repurposed old propaganda posters as items for sale in their gift shop. A Soviet-era poster of a ridiculously happy female “worker” holding up into the wind a flag or piece of fabric, now has this as a caption: “You couldn’t get laundry detergent, but you could get you BRAINWASHED!” Another one, also of very happy woman, though this one leading a parade of workers, reads, “It was a time of shiny, happy people. The shiniest were in the uranium mines.” Finally, the one we bought, with a picture of Stalin looking forceful, intimidating: “Museum of Communism: We’re above McDonald’s across the street from Benneton. Viva la Imperialism!”

We also bought Jack a soldier’s hat festooned with military pins. It was his birthday and, after much consideration, this is what he chose.

The next day, my sister and her family went to the museum (for our having talked it up), and Jack’s younger cousin spotted a hat nearly identical to the one Jack got.

He prevailed upon my mother to buy it for him.

When Jack found out, he was enraged. “He copied me!” was the accusation. “He only wanted it because I wanted it!”

This is a matter of mimesis, this is *all* a matter of mimesis—of one person’s desire distorted by what another person has or is believed to have, of one family group’s desire shaped by what another family group has seen or done, of one nation’s desire twisted by what another nation has or is perceived to have.

A matter of mimesis: if I seem to be preaching on this a lot—this week, last week, quite possibly next week—it’s because I was steeped in it on that trip. The four cousins got along very well for the most part, but when things broke down it was due to such distorted desire and the perception that someone’s got something that the rest want and don’t have and are being thwarted in their attempts to get—and so the best they can do is make it so that one doesn’t have it either. The four countries we visited, and their various ideological outlooks over the last century or so, were largely determined by such distorted desire and the perception that others have more goodies in life than they have and the lengths to which each would go to correct for all this—either to invade and take those goodies for themselves or to bomb everything to rubble to no one gets anything. Even between my sister and me: how easily we regress to our sibling state. What she orders for lunch, I also order. What I buy at a

shop, she also buys. Usually not hostile, it's also hardly conscious—and that's what's so spooky about! It just happens, a spell you fall under without noticing how or why—the model turned rival, and the object of desire either won or lost or destroyed or, by grace, shared in and so increased.

Tobias is on the cusp of no longer being a child. He would play as a child with the other three boys, but then he'd emerge from that and wonder at how the other three boys interact. “Why do they fight over such things as toothpicks?” which they did, by the way, resulting in tears and nearly fisticuffs and at least one broken toothpick. (“Now *no one* gets it!”)

I explained, “When you're a child, you can only determine the value of things by watching how the people around you evaluate these things. But as you mature, you're less hooked by what others have, less enslaved to that way of establishing value and desirability. You're more able to know for yourself, to decide for yourself.”

But I actually don't think that's strictly true. I don't think it's a matter of knowing for yourself—because, you see, I doubt very much our own ability to know anything for ourselves, I doubt very much our ability truly to self-determine. I think we're very fundamentally other-determined. I think our sense of self is conferred and received more than found for oneself. I think our identity is given to us, much as we might insist otherwise, much as we might really feel ourselves to be independent, to be self-made. How often have you even said, “I'll make up my own mind”? What I'm saying now is that, no, you won't. None of us will. We'll believe ourselves to making up our own minds. But the truth is, we'll largely have our minds made up for us by others, by our larger culture, by our moment in history.

The question then is, whom will we have make up our minds?

I said as much to Tobias. “My aim is to look to God to understand value and meaning and purpose; to think of Christ whom we're meant to imitate; and to pray, to discern, to search inwardly and listen outwardly, all in order to know what I truly hope for and desire, what's mine to do, to have, to forego, or to offer others.”

He seemed to get it. He even told me about a girl at school who, wearing a new shirt, received much praise. One friend even said to her (and in this tone of voice, apparently), “Oh, I love that shirt. Where did you get it?” and he said to the girl later, “She was like, ‘I love your shirt. I want to tear it to shreds.’”

Yes, exactly, I told him!

So, how about this instead: looking less to my sibling, my cousin, my neighbor, my “mimetic double” whosoever that might be at any given moment, and more to God whom I know in Christ and who is within me and within you and among us all in the Holy Spirit that I might know who I am and what I’m about? This is the one thing.

This is the one needful thing.

I wonder if Martha might, in searching herself, realize that she actually *enjoys* the tasks of hospitality, that this is indeed her form of worship.

As for this week, we as a society might be on the cusp of a race war. There are those who are stoking such a thing. That was the hope of last year’s shooter in Mother Zion AME Church. That was perhaps some larger aim of this week’s sniper. The rhetoric in the comments that follow news articles on-line, which quickly turns inciting and hateful, resentful and accusatory, suggests there are others out there who, though less confrontational, would love to see us all tear each other apart. The rhetoric from some politicians exploits tribal fissures, and so deepens them. All together, we speak as if civilization doesn’t need careful stewardship and cultivation, and we group up and treat other groups as if the larger social world on which our lives depend can withstand endless abuse. Given this tinderbox of a social text, we then foolishly carry weapons so powerful that a momentary loss of temper (which seems inevitable, right?) can end in violent death — all while we believe such weapons are what guarantee our safety.

Is it getting worse? I don’t know. I tend to believe what Steve Snyder once quoted to me: that things have always been this bad, and things have always been this good. But right now, this week, it feels pretty bad.

What we as Americans lack is a real sense of what’s at stake when society wears itself away by the cultivation of nothing but resentment. But all of that is yet in full display in much of Central Europe, from what I could tell: people there know what’s at stake when nihilism is what we might *actually* pursue. Here, though, here what we know of such things we see on *Game of Thrones* or in *Grand Theft Auto*. And you know what? It looks pretty cool, and seems *very* gratifying — the assumption being that *my* resentment will prove true, that *our* resentments will be justified.

Christ wouldn't justify Martha in her resentment, and so I imagine wouldn't justify any of us in our resentments, whether petty or grand—and some of us have some quite grand ones. I mean, really, what are black people in America supposed to feel when so much of what we're seeing, due to smartphones and social media, is gross racism and horrific violence racially-motivated and charged? What are they supposed to feel if not unjustly targeted and so resentful and outraged and even desirous of retaliation?

Ta-Nahesi Coates wrote in an article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, "...in America there is a strange and powerful belief that if you stab a black person ten times, the bleeding stops and the healing begins the moment the assailant drops the knife." But, no, of course. Healing takes time; healing mortal wounds takes intention and the care of others, beginning with the recognition that there's been a stabbing at all.

So that's where we are: mortal wounds all around us and the need for care. Given this, resentment is an indulgence we can't afford and I, for one, don't want. I find it enervating. I find it enslaving. I want more out of life. I want freedom and to be fully human among a fullness of humanity.

Really, I think that's the one thing I most want.

One thing.

What about you?

Thanks to be to God.