

“Called to Action – and Reflection” (Sermon Feb 9, 2020)

Texts: Deuteronomy 30:11-14; Luke 10:38-42

This is my state of the congregation sermon as outgoing chair. And a contribution to our theme, Bearing Light, Women in the Bible. Not forgetting that today we also celebrate with parents and commit to helping them raise their children, and rejoice that four people are formally joining our congregation. All that in ten minutes.

I begin with a banquet – like the garden, or the harvest, or the well-watered city, it is one of the biblical images of the kingdom, of what God intended the world to be like. Martha is the host. Her status and relationship to Jesus is similar to that of Phoebe and Paul, described for us so well last week by Alison Li. In Martha’s culture, Jewish and Hellenistic, banquets were more than social gatherings, they were cultural and religious occasions. They were usually hosted by men, for other men – friends, family members. Banquets were opportunities to initiate younger men into the rites and customs, the stories and traditions of the community. These younger men or boys would begin their initiation by serving the food. They would observe how to behave in community, how to treat their elders. Eventually they would graduate and be given places at the table.

At Martha’s banquet, her younger sister Mary immediately sits or reclines at Jesus’s feet, in other words, next to him at the table, on his right. Martha, the older sister, the host, was not at the table. The NRSV reads “Martha was distracted by her many tasks.” That’s a legitimate translation of a double entendre. Some in Luke’s first audience would no doubt have heard, “Martha was busy serving the many courses.” She comes to Jesus and asks, “Doesn’t it bother you, Jesus, that Mary isn’t helping me?” She doesn’t point out that Mary has inverted the order of things – the younger person is supposed to serve the food while the older person sits at the table with the guests. Jesus, as the special guest, should pay special attention to his host. That’s the socially respectable thing to do. Jesus’s reply is also ambiguous. According to the NRSV Jesus says “Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things”; but again, Martha or the first audience could also have heard Jesus say “Martha, you are paying far too much attention to your many courses, one would have been enough.” Mary, says Jesus, “has chosen the better part” or, in James Moffatt’s translation (1922), “Mary has chosen the best dish.”

We could all point to many parallel stories in the gospels. Here are a few that occur to me. Mary is like the woman with ten coins who loses one, turns her house upside down to find it, and then celebrates with her friends. Or, Mary is like the man who sells everything he has in order to buy a

field in which is buried a great treasure. My favourite: there is another story in Luke, which also involves a younger sibling who is socially unconventional, a banquet, and an unhappy older sibling. Any guesses? Yes, the prodigal son (or prodigal father, as Trent Voth called it in his memorable sermon last year). I'll leave you to reflect on the structural similarity between the two stories in the context of Luke's presentation of the gospel.

I choose this passage because two of the three main characters are women, and our theme this season is Bearing Light, Women in the Bible. I checked with some members of the preaching team to make sure none of them had chosen it. None had. I wasn't surprised. It's a complex story with a history. Like so much of the Bible, this story has been used in ways that most of us would probably agree are unhealthy. The tradition has praised Mary while at the same time encouraging women to emulate Martha and stay in the kitchen. But I also discovered in my reading that the story has been life-giving. It was vital to reflections on the monastic life as it developed over the course of a thousand years. The rhythm of work and prayer or worship that's followed in monastic communities – by both men and women – was strongly influenced by reflection on this story. The first thousand years of Christian tradition did not see this story as a reflection on the role of women. Rather it saw in this story a meditation about the merits of action and reflection, and read the story as affirmation that both are equally important.

TUMC has been through a period in which we've made a number of important decisions. We adopted a new staffing model for ministry and called another pastor. And it's been only a few years since we completed a building project and launched a new ministry, Aurora House. Reflection has been part of those decisions, but the focus, it seems to me, has been more on the action.

There are good reasons for stress on action; the urgency of the present time calls for action. Many of us are part of the fortunate one percent but we too may be feeling the stress and anxiety caused by a sense of impending doom. But I think that a commitment to taking time for unhurried reflection is a sign of hope and faith. It's not an accident, I think, that Luke tells the story of Martha's banquet immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan. That parable is a favourite for those of us who are oriented to action. In Luke's gospel the parable of the Good Samaritan is followed by a story about a young woman who sits next to Jesus so that she can learn from him.

Yesterday at the AGM many of you participated in one of three conversations. The purpose was not to come to any decisions but to reflect on important practices in the life of the community we

are. They were opportunities to share with each other why we are here, what are our hopes, desires, and fears. When people formally join the church, we hear or read their stories. We talked yesterday about our practice of membership; if we make changes, I hope we don't stop hearing the kind of stories shared by Carol and David, Melanie and Ryan, in the recent Place of Meeting. Years ago it was TUMC's practice not to have sermons in summer. Instead, people shared their faith stories. I miss hearing those stories. Those stories should be the beginning of all of our reflections at TUMC. Who we are, why we are here, what we care about, what we hear God calling us to do, as individuals and as a community.

Today we have also committed ourselves to helping two families raise their children. Having and committing to raising children is also a profound commitment to hope in a world that is struggling to find hope. Our ministry with and to children and youth is not a distraction from a more important ministry, it is an essential part of a community of hope.

We're a community of doers. We won't, and shouldn't, stop our work with Aurora House, with refugees, and with other ministries. But at the moment I don't see before us any big decisions. I encourage us to take advantage of this season to grow in other ways, to grow as a community of faith, hope, and love so that through us, God's healing flows through us to our city and world.