

Martha, Mary and Michaelmas

A sermon by Nerissa Nields

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Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one.[a] Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

...and second scripture:

In every instant, two gates.
One opens to fragrant paradise, one to hell.
Mostly we go through neither.

Mostly we nod to our neighbor,
lean down to pick up the paper,
go back into the house.

But the faint cries—ecstasy? horror?
Or did you think it the sound
of distant bees,
making only the thick honey of this good life?

-Jane Hirshfield

Today is Michaelmas, a lesser Catholic feast that somehow always gets my attention. It makes me think of midlife. Maybe it makes everyone think of midlife. It comes, after all, just a few days after the autumn equinox, and autumn is certainly the season of midlife, what with the balding maples, the falling leaves, the drama before the long quiet.

This year Michaelmas falls also on a waning moon. It seems all of nature is conspiring to force us to think about the brevity of life. The two readings—the Martha/Mary story which Steve has preached about often, and the Jane Hirshfield poem—both touch on this idea of the choices we make, and it seems to me that midlife can be an especially painful time to sit with our choices. (Though I suspect every phase of life has this potential pain...)

When we were kids, we were Marys. My kids are Mary-like. They pay attention to the important stuff. They know that it's good for them to play, to move their bodies, to climb on things. They know a good story when they hear one, and they also know justice. They have an acute sense of what is fair.

As we age, we become more Martha-like. We don't pause from our dinner preparations to run outside during one of those summertime micro rain storms, to dance in the rain after a long dry dusty hot spell. We do the never ending laundry—Mount Washmore, my friend calls it. We go to the grocery store. We pick up the kids. We exercise—but on a schedule. And we justify our good, hard disciplined work: in any revolution there is work to be done, and Jesus surely was a revolutionary.

And don't the ones who do the work get the praise? So why is Jesus saying that Mary's the one who gets it?

Part of the gift of midlife is that we do get it. We see how painfully brief it all is. Now I know Mary's got the right idea. And I still

can't stop doing doing doing. Still I can't stop frantically doing the dishes, doing the laundry, telling my kids to hurry up so we won't be late to school. I do my meditation and my yoga—but I time myself with my iPhone and don't let myself linger. I tell myself I will go on a meditation retreat when the kids are older.

But I have the usual questions. Is Jesus saying we should always listen to God? Or just when he comes over for dinner? Does Jesus really want us to forgo making the beds in the morning and instead practice piano? Wasn't Jesus glad that Martha was making preparations? I know I'm not alone in having some feminist annoyance with this passage. Would it have been better if Martha had sat down too? But then there'd be no food for anyone. Maybe they would have just eaten locusts, then. Is Jesus saying "Sorry, babe. You're just a Martha. Marthas cook and clean. Marys sit and listen. Try again next life, and you might luck out."

Well, of course not. Jesus's whole point was to free us from the binary thinking of the old world, teach us non-dualism. No I, no Thou. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one. And so it is with you." Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." Last time I looked, it was hard to tell the difference between vine and branches. We're always Martha *and* Mary, just as God is in each of us, beyond all of us, and in the interactions between everything.

Moreover, when I grumbled a version of this to my friend Peter Ives, he pointed out that at the time of Jesus, women were barely considered human. For Jesus to say that Mary should sit and listen to him, and in fact Martha should put down her dishrag and join in too, was completely revolutionary. He was calling them, these two sisters, to be disciples, equals to his male followers. It's not really news in Bible scholarship that Jesus elevated the role of women to that of equal, though the Nicene Creed and fifteen hundred years of organized religion put the kibosh on much of that. But when I heard this, I had to look at my own internalized sexism. It hadn't occurred to me on first read-through that in fact Jesus might indeed

have been saying, “Dudes, your turn. Go make the dinner while Martha and Mary get their time with me. And if you don’t know how to make the dinner, go find some locusts.” For all we know, that was in the original text, only to be nixed three hundred years later during the Council of Nicea. Three hundred years later, women were back in their historical place.

This came through my email-box this morning from Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar:

Did you know the first half of life has to fail you? In fact, if you do not recognize an eventual and necessary dissatisfaction (in the form of sadness, restlessness, or even loss of faith), you will not move on to maturity. You see, faith really is about moving outside your comfort zone, trusting God’s lead, instead of just forever shoring up home base. Too often, early religious conditioning largely substitutes for any real faith.

Usually, without growth being forced on us, few of us go willingly on the spiritual journey. Why would we? The rug has to be pulled out from beneath our game, so we redefine what balance really is. More than anything else, this falling/rising cycle is what moves us into the second half of our own lives. There is a necessary suffering to human life, and if we avoid its cycles we remain immature forever. It can take the form of failed relationships, facing our own shadow self, conflicts and contradictions, disappointments, moral lapses, or depression in any number of forms.

All of these have the potential to either edge us forward in life or to dig in our heels even deeper, producing narcissistic and adolescent responses that everybody can see except ourselves.

And the other wise sage I came across was the comedian Louis CK who went on a rant about iPhones on the Conan O'Brien show. He basically says the same thing as Father Richard:

...you need to build an ability to just be yourself and not be doing something. That's what the phones are taking away, is the ability to just sit there. That's being a person. Because underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty—forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and that you're alone. It's down there.

And sometimes when things clear away, you're not watching anything, you're in your car, and you start going, 'oh no, here it comes. That I'm alone.' It starts to visit on you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it...

To be an artist, or a revolutionary, or just a good person trying to feel our way through life with a modicum of consciousness, we need to rest, Mary-style, fill the well. We need to do nothing. We need to look up at the sky, notice what kind of moon it is, breath in the smell of falling leaves and pond scum and compost and fall-bearing raspberries. To love someone, to really love someone, we need to give them years of our attention. Years. Focus and appreciation every single day. That's the sunlight they need to grow.

Last week, I happened to notice, as I occasionally do, all the people around me who were doing it better than me. By "it" I mean everything from having a music career to gaining spiritual insights. I couldn't help but notice all my spiritual friends who all seem to be gaining enlightenment at a frightening clip. My friend Julie went on a 10 day silent retreat, and now she has no more anger. My friend Charlotte did this three year long inventory of her greater defects and now she hears God' voice loud and clear and never has any questions about what she should do. All this makes me want to give up, give in, throw in the towel, text and drive, abandon my highly scheduled meditation practice. Instead I called

my mom and asked her what she thought of Sheryl Sandberg, the latest voice in the Mommy wars. Sandberg wrote a book called *Lean In*, which points out the sexism still rampant in our culture, and how hard it is for career women to be mothers and gives excellent advice to women who want to fight to keep their careers thriving. Sandberg exhorts women to lean in rather than lean back when they even begin to think about having a child. Recently, I've heard my peers rumbling with discontent about this message. "The problem is," said one of my closest friends, a highly successful author, "I really do want to lean back right now. I want to volunteer at my daughter's school. I want to make her Halloween costume. Is that so wrong?"

"Well there's just so much to hate about Sheryl Sandberg," my mother began. "She has nannies raising her children! What are all these people thinking, making \$300,000 a year! I am so glad I invested my time in you girls."

I'm pretty sure my mother hasn't read the book. She, like me, had a career and also had kids, and tried to balance them as well as she could, which seemed to involve a lot of yelling and tossing of backpacks into the car with a hot cup of coffee sloshing about. It's true that when push came to shove, she would choose her children every time. But still, my mother worked hard. She sure as hell leaned in. She was always grading papers at the kitchen table, cooking our dinner, making our lunches, or playing extremely competitive tennis during those hours after school and before dinner. She did not get on the floor and play games with us, or engage in imaginative play. But she did sit on my bed at the day's end and ask me to talk about things. She knew what the better part was. Mostly. Like all of us, she was sometimes Martha, sometimes Mary.

So if Jesus is calling us to be disciples, if Jesus is calling women to be disciples with the same urgency that he calls men, this brings us right back to the question women have been wrestling with since

the dawn of the women's movement. I, for one, certainly can make the dualism about choosing family over career, for instance. Last week, Katryna and I opened for a great singer songwriter Cheryl Wheeler. Cheryl is one of a kind. She looks like what she is: a 62 year old who dresses in LL Bean (onstage and off), loves her dogs and Cathleen, her wife of 10 years, and doesn't give a whit about what the music business—or anyone else for that matter—thinks of her. She is hilarious, occasionally raunchy, onstage, so funny that my sides often hurt from laughing so hard when I am at one of her shows. She has a song on her latest CD called “Shutchier Piehole”, making the point that it would be really hard if your last name were “Piehole” and your parents named you “Shutchier.” Hard, yes, but funny. A few songs later, she delivered her 1980's love ballad “Arrow,” a song so achingly beautiful we were all in tears by the end. Her following is as strong today as it ever was. Her fans are loyal; we opened for her in 1992 at the Iron Horse, and a couple from last Friday's concert came up to us and said, “I remember seeing you at that show, 21 years ago...”

Cheryl has what I always wanted. A career that keeps growing. She sang songs she'd just written, along side songs that were over thirty years old. But what's most enviable about her show is that she is just...Cheryl. She is totally herself. There is no artifice. She is completely unconcerned about whether or not we like her. She performs sitting down and refuses to leave the stage for the encore. She asked the lighting engineer to turn down the lights because “No one paid to see the visuals. If they did they would be sorely disappointed. They came to listen.”

Though I can try to make this about right and wrong, Martha and Mary, kids versus career, what I really want is that comfort with myself. I want to not care whether or not you notice that my face isn't airbrushed. I want to not care if you notice that I've gained or lost a few pounds. But more than that, I want to not care what you think about how hard I'm working, how much I'm doing, how the fact that I spent the last seven years trying to raise human beings

has resulted in flaws, in big gaping holes in my artistic work, not to mention the more painful flaws in my parenting. I want to stop trying to prove my worth by scrubbing the dishes for the revolutionaries. I want instead to sit around, the way Cheryl did, and chew the fat with her old buddies who'd paid \$25 a head just to see her. And I want the humility to keep learning, keep growing. I want to laugh. And this is both the gift of an awake, aware midlife passage, and the gift of discipleship.

As Hirshfield seems to be saying, every instant has two gates, but it's true that we mostly go through neither. We're just not that awake most of the time. Martha didn't choose incorrectly just because Mary happened to see the instant and go through the gate of paradise. Martha just missed seeing the gate. We all do, all the time. We get worried and upset—that's a guarantee if we are human. It's more than guaranteed if we're parents. In fact, every single day I vow, on my knees, that I will do better, that I will be patient with my kids, that I will not be short with them, that I will react to frustration with humor (in fact I have "react to frustration with humor" as a reminder on my iPhone, and it pops up regularly, along with "don't read your iPhone right now—pay attention to the kids instead." And still, every day, I lose it. I lose it even as I am praying not to. Even as I am thinking, "don't shame her, let her be herself," I say, "You're wearing THAT to school?"

But then, there is grace, too. Somehow, I can sometimes see the gates and choose the better one. Yesterday, a perfect September afternoon with a cloudless sky, I abandoned my agenda and let the kids stay late at school to play on the playground. Johnny found a pick up game of soccer. I stood and watched him race across the field, galloping after the ball, kicking, falling, getting up again, chasing the bigger kids, leaping from one foot to the other. I breathed in the sweet smell of cut grass, the late blooming sedum, and said Yes. This is the better part. Or maybe it's just the thick honey of this good life.

