

## Faithfulness – Martha, Mary and Sarah

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Gen. 18:1-14, Luke 10:38-42

There's no one formula for being a faithful person. That comes straight from Jesus: Love God, your neighbor yourself – that's the great commandment – but how to do it is the ongoing work of faith, and there is no one formula. There are no easy answers.

Certainly Jesus does not give them. Last week we heard the parable of the good Samaritan who actively helped a man in need, stopping on his own journey to take the trouble. In this morning's gospel, Jesus seems to be praising Mary for sitting quietly and listening to him while Martha rushes about preparing food, getting everything ready, doing all the work.

Which is it? Living one's faith through compassionate action, or enriching our faith through learning and contemplation? And then, in the Genesis story, we have another example. Abraham is like Martha, running around washing feet, preparing a meal, a calf and curds and milk, ordering his wife to make cakes. He wants to be sure the three strangers whom he somehow recognizes as angels or an embodiment of God are well treated. Just like Martha wanted her hospitality for Jesus to be just right.

Meanwhile, Sarah has her own response – laughter. Hiding in the tent, she scoffs at the insane idea that she and Abraham, way too old, could possibly have a child, or even that kind of pleasure together. So, in these readings we have four of the Biblical great ones – Abraham and Sarah, parents of the whole nation of Israel from which Jesus will come, and Martha and Mary, two very close followers and friends of Jesus – part of his intimate circle. These are all faithful people.

Their responses to God's word, at least in these brief glimpses, are various – dutiful activity, lots of busyness, calm attentive listening, and laughter, laughter at an impossible promise. There's no one formula for faithfulness, and of course there are many other responses besides these to the God experiences in our lives. So how do we know what faithfulness entails? When to be like Mary, or Martha and Abraham, or Sarah? What is it to be faithful?

It's a good question as we think about our participation in this faith community as well as our individual spirituality. Certainly our community needs many kinds of responses, many models for how to live faithfully. We can learn from one another, and we can take different roles indifferent circumstances.

Like most churches, we have a core group of active members, many of whom serve in leadership positions on the vestry and various committees and who keep very, very busy doing so – I’m sure some might say too busy. They are our Marthas, and we couldn’t do without them. As volunteers, they keep track of our money and our property; they are overseeing our so far wonderfully successful capital campaign and the enormous complexity of the chancel renovation and organ project. They teach our children, mentor our youth, sleep in tents at Camp Joy, plan our educational program, implement our outreach, both hands on and financial. In worship they sing and greet and serve wine and read and lead prayers, carry candles and the cross. Behind the scenes they polish brass and wash and iron linens and arrange flowers. They keep track of folks who are sick or in need of help, visiting, taking flowers, offering rides and food. Our volunteers provide us with a whole array of fellowship events. They shop and cook and serve and set up and clean up. Martha would definitely be at home here!

We also have our Marys – faithful in very different but also very important ways. We have those who almost never miss worship. We have two Bible study groups. We have a dedicated contemplative prayer group, meeting in silence for at least twenty minutes – something some of us would find almost intolerable. We have folks who pray daily, seriously and earnestly for those on our prayer list and all in their hearts. We have many, some unknown to most of us, some quite elderly, who are still devoted to St. John’s, who read our news, send in their pledges, receive care in their homes and sometimes hospitals – bearing witness, with their patience and receptiveness, to a faith that lives far beyond the urgencies of committee work.

Some of us combine qualities of both Mary and Martha – people who are active doers with a contemplative side – choosing to bring both kinds of gifts to our life in this community. Probably many of us who are all Martha or all Mary might want to cultivate that other side – either way, it could enliven our faith.

And then the laughter of Sarah. The scoffing at God’s impossible, inscrutable ways – what about that? Where do we see that in ourselves? How is that faithful? How is that helpful? I think it’s faithful because it’s an honest expression of skepticism, and there isn’t one of us who doesn’t have at least an occasional moment of stepping back from the religious enterprise and wondering – is this really true and worth it, or some kind of cosmic joke?

It’s been said, actually by me some years ago, that believers need skeptics and skeptics need believers and life challenges both. (repeat) Belief that is never challenged can be rigid and pious, and when life drops a bomb, the believer

who's never been open to doubt may feel horribly betrayed, may even feel his faith has been destroyed. But skepticism that just laughs (as does Christopher Hitchens and his currently popular ilk) at the promise and hope and consolation of faith, can be naïve and spiritually shallow, and when life drops a bomb, the skeptic may wish for the habits of faith which give warmer comfort than the thin mantle of logically defensible doubt.

There is a place for Sarah's laughter – a place for skepticism – in our hearts and in our church. It serves to test us, keep us honest about what we believe and what we don't believe, and why it matters.

Our laughter at God can be derisive, born of disappointment, born perhaps out of frustration with the institutional church and its doctrinal and liturgical battles. Recently we hear that only the church of Rome is the true church; the Latin mass is coming back; the Anglican Communion is splitting. Sometimes you do just want to laugh at all this – so sad and pathetic, so not-Jesus.

Our laughter and skepticism can sometimes be personal and bitter. How can God allow for so much pain in our own or a loved one's life? How can there be so much insane cruelty and misery in the wider world? How can our children and Muslim children keep dying in wars fueled at least in part by religion? We laugh, hollowly – the sick laughter of a Michael Moore, the sardonic laughter of impotent rage.

But better than this mocking, scornful laughter of skepticism is a different kind of skeptical laughter - what I would call the laughter of delight. Sometimes, in the face of outrageous promise and despite our skepticism, hope is born – hope that a promise will really come true – that old Sarah will really have a son, that a way through to the end of this too long war will really be found, that leadership deserving of the goodness and true values of our country will emerge and be elected.

This is the incredulous laughter that comes when the impossible becomes possible, when promise becomes real. When you just have to laugh with wonder at the amazing way things turn out better than you could ever have imagined. When is the last time you laughed in that way? When will you laugh in that way again? Amidst all our Martha-ing and Mary-ing, let's always make room for the laughter and skepticism of Sarah. They are paths for honest doubt and true hope, gifts of grace to us all.

A MORE PERSONAL NOTE:

This is the last time I'll be in the pulpit until the end of August, and it has been an extraordinary 3 ½ months since Harrison got sick and then I've had cancer treatment. I've felt and behaved probably more like Martha than Mary, and Harrison has had to lie quietly and then move slowly and wait and watch and heal – more like Mary than Martha.

And then, because I thought my biopsy had to be negative because Harrison was so sick – and then it wasn't, well, in a way, I laughed – because God never seems to fit our expectations – why not have both clergy stricken at the same time – and Holy Week and Eastertide at that!

But now, here is Harrison back with us and stronger each week, and here am I with 4 more days of radiation and then a month's vacation – and in these three months past, our life as a parish has, for me, anyway, held a sweetness of mutual care and concern beyond anything I've known here. There's no one formula for faithfulness, but I do believe what we have done and lived together in these months had been faithful and good and true. I thank you all and go on vacation with a full and grateful heart. Amen.