

**Mary and Martha:
Joy, Duty and the Holy**

Sermon by The Rev. Jim Eller

**All Souls
Unitarian Universalist Church
Kansas City, Missouri
allsoulskc.org**

November 6, 2005

Mary, Martha and the presence of the Holy: a story told in three parts

First, the Martha energy:

Why do I have to do all the work? What's wrong with her that she's not carrying her load? Why am I the one being stuck with the dirty work? What's in it for me? When do I get the good portion? It all seems so unfair.

Does this **whining** sound at all familiar? It is certainly a universal story. It is the story of Mary and Martha, and it is a suggestive allegory about welcoming and radical hospitality.

All of us have these Martha moments. I think of this childhood experience as one of my classic Martha moments. The pear trees were beautiful in the spring, as they filled with blossoms. These were not the ornamental trees that are so common now. These were fruit-bearing trees. Come late summer and early fall, they were filled with pears, which the birds and wasps eat. They fell to the ground, making a pungent mess. It fell to my younger brother and mostly to me to rake and shovel them into trashcans for disposal. It was a hot and smelly chore. It was also a bit dangerous because of the number of wasps and yellow jackets that feed on them. My sister was too young, I guess and not good for much, ...even if she was ordered to help out. My older brother had better things to do. Why me? Why me? Why weren't others in charge of this mess? It just was mine to do. As a member of the family, we all take turns doing the dirty work. And yes resentment and anger can be useful energizers in helping us get the dirty work done, as long as we don't take them too seriously.

This is my Martha story, and it is not unique. When have you been stuck with the dirty work and felt left out and

resentful? It is not a pretty sight, but it seems real and on target as it captures this so very human experience.

Yet, scripture advises us to see beyond the drudgery and smell the roses. Martha, you have your place, but so does Mary and Mary should not have her good portion taken from her. Scripture calls us to welcome the guest, and to remember that the presence of the Holy is more important than the chores.

When an honored guest is expected in our homes, we often clean house, get ready, lay out our best china, and make lots of fuss. I too have witnessed or been guilty of spending so much time getting ready for the party that by the time it comes, I can hardly enjoy the guests who have arrived because of the work of getting ready. Scripture wisely reminds us to do less getting ready and enjoy the guest more.

Yes, spirit should outweigh "oughtness" and duty. Taking time for Sabbath should outweigh hectic schedules and our too often excessive busyness.

In the story Martha symbolizes oughtness and tedium. Mary symbolizes our awareness or readiness to welcome joy and beauty into our lives. And Jesus is the welcomed guest and the unexpected presence of the Holy.

It is true that we all have trouble getting to all of the things we ought to get done. There are a lot of things any of us ought to do. Some of these "oughtnesses" are more useful than others. Yes, any of us can get caught up in resentment, in triviality, or in blind duty and obedience to obligation. We are wisely advised to be mindful.

Second, let us consider Mary...

There is a UU minister who took this mandate seriously. There are some who are swayed by his example. He said, "When people join a church, they come for Intimacy and Ultimacy and we give them a committee." So, his response was to eliminate all the committees in his church. He wanted interest teams and spiritual seed groups. His belief is that we all have within us a divine seed and the purpose of the church is nurture that seed. "If you feel like the only reason you're doing a chore is because you ought to do it, then don't," he said. Do instead the things that truly matter. Follow your heart; listen to the listing of the spirit; focus on the spiritual and forget the business. The growing of the soul should be our concern; the rest will take care of itself.

He wanted an entire church community of "Marys."

He thought this would free everyone and empower the members. It had almost the opposite effect. Without committees, there was no democracy. It meant that the minister and staff made all of the decisions and did much of the work. Rather than empowering it disempowered. The congregation finally became empowered by firing that minister. Unfortunately, this was about the only way left to be empowered given his model of ministry.

Mary is great but so is Martha. Give us plenty of Marthas in any given church. They are the ones who build the institution and hold the place together. Committee work is not always pretty or even fun in the moment. Working out job

descriptions and pay scales for all of our staff is not all fun and games, but it is necessary. Balancing the budget, fund raising or managing the giving campaigns can be hard and even embarrassing work, but without it there would be no staff and only a fraction of the church we have. Yes, it sometimes takes bored members to do the Board work of a church, but bless those who are willing to sacrifice an evening a week or an evening a month to make our church work.

Yes, the reason the religious far right is winning these days is that they are more than willing to spend more evenings and weekends to fight their fight than we on the left seem to have the willingness to give. Yes, thanks to all the Martha energy, for without it there would not a democratic process or an empowered laity.

That said, let me pause...and admit

...a post-feminist critique. I have to comment, wouldn't it be telling, if Peter or John, or even Jesus had said, "Hey, thanks for the lovely meal and all of your generous hospitality, but if you did the cooking, let us do the dishes. And by the way, it hasn't been my turn to do the cooking for a few days, how about if I help put on the coffee and desert, while you take a turn enjoying our guest and the wonderful conversation we have been having."

Let me put this another way. I wonder if the dichotomy of Mary and Martha isn't a false dichotomy. I prefer "both-and" rather than "either-or" thinking. Maybe we really need to have both Martha and Mary, not one more than the other. In fact, much of our time is filled with daily chores that need to be

done. Fun is not the point of an exercise program or healthy diet, but the end result makes the self-denial worthwhile.

Carrying water and chopping wood can be the end in themselves, and done consciously the meal prepared from that fire is all the more tasty and so the preparation can be that much more beautiful. The process and the preparation can be ends in and of themselves.

Much of our time is spent in daily tasks. We can see the Mary amidst the Martha, joy and learning amidst duty and obligation, if we have eyes to see, then Martha may not be that different than Mary. Duty done rightly is its own reward.

My brother-in-law is a UU minister. I remember one of his sermons from early in his ministry. It was called the "spirituality of flossing." Any healthy practice can be done with intentionality. When we slow down and become more fully aware, we too can appreciate the beauty of that moment. Now matter what the practice. Breathing can be a meditation. Walking can be a meditation. Taking bits of strawberries and chocolate can be an encounter with beauty, wonder and even the Holy. The point of a spiritual practice is to increase centering and health. Done slowly and thoughtfully, day after day for years, flossing can be a spiritual practice, he maintained.

Our many forms of duty need not be an invitation to resentment but can be an opening to delight. Buddhism starts with the assumption that there will be desire, suffering, pain, and attachment, but once you admit and accept your duty, your dharma, then there is only joy and wonder in its place. The joy

comes from practicing right relationship, right speech, right livelihood, right living. The process and the outcome are not different. They are the same. Mary and Martha are from the same family.

Third, the place of the Holy:

Given that Mary and Martha, duty and joyous learning, can be brought together, we may still be slightly off the mark. The story may be more right than we think. We have looked at Mary, at Martha and at the two together, but we have not yet considered the honored guest. Whether we believe in the existence of Jesus or, even less likely in this church, in Jesus as the embodiment of God, he is the symbol in this story of the presence of the Holy. The question this story asks us is "What do we do when we encounter the Holy?" How do we respond when an honored guest is in our home? What do we do when the face of God is before us? It does not matter what you mean by God or even whether you use the word. Each of us has times, when we are confronted by deep meaning, by some sense of Ultimacy. This is an encounter with the Holy. When and how do you experience the Holy, that which is precious or profound to you?

I think of the choir or musicians, when they are at their best. There sometimes comes a point when the musicians move from playing the music to the music playing the musicians. Music can become so involving and wonderful that it takes on a life of its own beyond the gift of the individual or even of the group and something more begins to take place. This "something more" happens for all of us at times, in the work we do, in our relationships, or in our worship.

In most instances, when the Holy arrives, it does not come on a schedule, but arrives in its own time and with its own timing. The Mary and Martha story reminds us to slow down, and take the time to allow these encounters. Sure ninety-eight percent of our time is taken up with the mundane, which can become holy, but one in a hundred, one in a thousand, one in a million can be an epiphany. Don't be too busy to see it, says our story.

In my first church as a parish minister, the Religious Education Director came into my office. Carol was her name. She said, "Have you ever seen a solar eclipse?" I had not, at that point in my life. I had only longed to see one. Well, she said, "There is going to be one today, in about two hours. How about if we take a long lunch hour and watch it together? We can eat outside, visit and watch the shadows change. Will you?" "Well, I am pretty busy. I have meetings right up until lunch and a writing project to get done, and I should go over to the hospital this afternoon, too...." "Well, I will bring sandwiches and other lunch stuff and we can talk business. If it will make you more comfortable, we can call it a staff conference. I promise it will have something to do with Religious Education."

We sat there chatting on a beautiful sunny seventy-degree fall afternoon. The visiting was pleasant. We did do some work in the process, and then it began to happen. The light changed. It was not obvious but subtle. It was still a sunny day, but it was cooler and the sunlight was less intense. And then she said, "Look at the shadows. The sun-dappled spots on the sidewalk under the trees looked different. All the dappling was now made of little crescents. You cannot look at the sun

directly, but you can see the same image in shadow.” It was amazing. Across the street there was a group of guys in the welding shop out looking through their masks. We ran over and looked directly at the solar eclipse. It was like a holiday festival that lasts only a few minutes, then it was back to work. The guys the shop laughed and headed in. We did too. Carol smiled when I called her our religious educator, because she knew she was. It was just a small interruption in a busy day.

The marvelous nature of life is everywhere evident for those with eyes to see. Yes, it can be both Mary and Martha together, if we are willing to see it the beauty that it every moment, that is the “something more” that is always present. Then there are times, when something more does happen. We can miss all of that, if we keep our head to the grindstone and forget to look up. So, look to the heavens from which your days are given and are blessed. We are stardust from beginning to end.

Opening Words

I had not imagined talking about Mary and Martha, but I was inspired by Bishop Spong this week. He makes a case for this Mary being Mary Magdalene, and Magdala meaning “Mary the Great,” the first Mary, the most important disciple. Although this is of interest, the story called me in a different direction: it calls me to honor the Holy and welcome the honored guest.

Readings

The First Autumn, by May Sarton

Though in a little while
You will be dead again
After this first rehearsal
Since then and all the pain,
Still it's not death that spends
So tenderly this treasure
In leaf – rich golden winds,
But life in lavish measure.

October spends the aster,
Riches of purple, blue,
Lavender, white that glow
In ragged starry cluster.
Then, when November comes,
Shaggy chrysanthemums,
Salmon-pink, saffron yellow,
All coppers bright and mellow,
Stand up against the frost
And never count the cost.

No, it's not death this year
Since then and all the pain.
It's life we harvest here
(Sun on the crimson vine).
The garden speaks your name.
We drink your joys like wine.

Conversations of Mary and Martha, by Kathleen McTigue

The story is told in the gospel of Luke, and takes up only five short verses. "Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at his feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But he answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'"

When I was a child hearing this story, I smugly identified with Mary. I was the younger of two sisters, with Mary as my first name and Margaret as my sister's – close enough to 'Martha' for us to know who was who. But much more important than those accidents of birth order and name was the common, familiar echo of real life that could be heard in Martha's plaintive voice: "she isn't helping! Make her do her share!"

There is no sibling who has not heard and spoken some version of those words, no parent of sibling that hasn't heaved a sigh at listening to them, over and over again in their endless, subtle variations. "He has more than I have!" "Do not!" "Do too!", or, "She's making me do all the clean up and you don't even care!" or "How come he always gets to do what he wants and I always have to do the work?" So as a child, I was very attracted to Mary of the story, imagining the protective arm of Jesus himself stretched out to defend against my sister's

complaints. How nice to get to sit and listen while someone else took care of the boring, busy details of life, and how lovely to do so with holy righteousness, no less.