

I wanted to adopt the Narrative Lectionary because I was excited about getting things a little shaken up. I'd preached from the regular lectionary for about 30 years, and it seemed like it could be good to vary the routine. And it must be, because this week I had to think really hard about how to preach on both the good Samaritan *and* the Mary-Martha story. The Narrative Lectionary puts them together. Here's what I think: I think when you look at both stories together, you see that in each case, the question was raised, What is to be done here and now? So maybe that's our question.

Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a question about who one's neighbor is, if one is supposed to love one's neighbor as oneself. He tells about a traveler beaten and left for dead along a road, and a priest and a Levite who pass him by without trying to help him. Who helps him? A person about whom all we know is that he is a Samaritan. You know that Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Samaritans were the people who ended up living in the northern part of Israel after Assyria annihilated the kingdom—they were the remnants of common Jews mixed with the various captive peoples whom the Assyrians had exported to that territory. They thought of themselves as Jews, but Jews didn't—under the Maccabees, the Jews had even burned down the Samaritans' temple. Not only that, but right before this story, in Chapter 9, Jesus had been rejected by a village of Samaritans and refused hospitality. The insult must have been fresh in his disciples' minds when he told this story, and it had to be not only shocking but galling that he made the hero of the story a Samaritan, when it was a made-up story and he could have made him something else like a Greek or an Egyptian.

“Which of these three . . . was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Jesus asks, and his questioner can’t even say the word “Samaritan;” he says, “the one who showed him mercy.” The man who was beaten and robbed, if he’s going to love his neighbor as himself, will have to love a Samaritan. There’s no telling whom Jesus’ questioner is going to have to love.

When we turn to the story of Mary and Martha, we see, apparently, a division of labor gone bad. (Actually this reminds me of a cartoon of Jesus sitting in the living room while smoke billows from the kitchen, and he’s saying, “Mary, I think you had better help Martha.”) Martha is very commendably bustling around getting things done, and Mary is sitting, listening to Jesus, and Martha appeals to Jesus to tell Mary to get up and pull her weight. Jesus answers that Martha is worried and distracted by many things, but that there is need of only one thing, which Mary has chosen.

This has been taken as a reproof of Martha for doing the very necessary work of hospitality and therefore, an undervaluing of women’s work, which was already undervalued to begin with. Or, it’s sometimes taken as a recommendation that we nurture both the active and the contemplative sides of our natures, although I don’t see Jesus affirming Martha’s side at all in this story. I used to wonder why Jesus himself didn’t get up and help Martha, if he was such a champion of the underdog. But Nadia Bolz-Weber offers a more helpful interpretation. She says that it’s not doing work or being busy that’s the problem, it’s being distracted and worried that’s the problem. “We are distracted from the better part when we judge the actions or inactions of others *through the lens of our own personality.*”

She gives a trivial example: when she's in the turn lane waiting for a green arrow, she wants to be considerate of the people behind her, who certainly want to get through the intersection on the same green arrow as her, so she follows the car in front of her very closely. She notices that other people ahead of her will sometimes allow several car lengths between themselves and the car ahead of them, effectively wasting space and increasing the possibility that people behind them will not make the light. Clearly, she assumes, such people are not team players; they are selfish and inconsiderate. Then she says, "Wow. That's a lot of judgment on the personhood of someone based solely on how quickly they turn on green."

The way we handle a green traffic arrow is not the "better part," or "main thing". The better part or main thing in this example is driving carefully. When we judge the actions of others based on our own way of moving through the world, we are distracted from the main thing. When the "main thing" is living our faith, we know there are many ways to do that, and if Mairi is writing a liturgy while Rich is working at the Red Cross, neither one is wrong. What's wrong, I guess, is being distracted, judging the actions or inactions of another through the lens of our own personality.

Both of these stories show us people responding to the need of the moment, disregarding predetermined roles. The Samaritan disregards an ancient enmity to rescue another human being in distress. Mary grabs the chance to learn from Jesus while he's available. I mean it as no put-down of Martha; I think her problem is distraction, not the praiseworthy desire to offer hospitality. Jesus was always trying to wake us up from sleepwalking through life, fulfilling our roles and checking off

boxes. I think when you put these two stories together you get an exhortation to live out the radical values of the kingdom of God, even—or perhaps especially—in unexpected or unanticipated ways. Let us pray.

Compassionate God,

How easily you love those who look unlovable to us! How readily you welcome undesirables into your home! How slow we are to follow your example. Turn our hearts toward all who are considered outcast, shunned, and unclean so that we may love our neighbor without pity or apathy, for the sake of the one who became flesh to cleanse the world of sin and death forever, Jesus Christ our redeemer. Amen.