

July 21, 2013

Amos 8:1-12

Psalm 52

Colossians 1:15-28

LUKE 10:38-42

WHO CAN BE A DISCIPLE?

If, say, Archbishop Desmond Tutu came to preach at Christ Church, how many of you would *expect* to spend all morning in the kitchen upstairs preparing lunch, and exclude yourselves from hearing the sermon? Any hands? How many of you would be outraged if, on such an occasion, there were signs on all of the doors of the church reading “Men Only” allowed in church today? [I raise my right hand, as do many others.] Good.

We have one person to thank for the fact that such ideas are ridiculous to us, almost unimaginable: Jesus. Jesus is the reason women and men can sit anywhere they want in worship -- unlike in gender-segregated Muslim or Orthodox Jewish worship.

Jesus is the reason that in my own lifetime The Episcopal Church finally read the Gospels and changed the rules to allow women to serve as vestry members and wardens of churches, deputies to Diocesan Convention, deacons, priests, deans of seminaries and cathedrals, bishops and as Presiding Bishop.

We have had a profound transformation of our understanding of the appropriate “roles” of women and men in just two generations, a change which has at times seemed painfully slow to some, far too quick and too radical to some others, but when viewed in the broad sweep of history is, simply remarkable when we consider for how many thousand of years things were very different.

Today’s Gospel reading -- all five verses of it -- is one of those stories about Jesus which were and are revolutionary in the best sense: when people finally compared Jesus’ attitude and behavior to their own attitudes and behavior they -- we, I -- realized we had to change.

The traditional, Medieval way to look at the story of Martha and Mary was to see Jesus exalting “the contemplative life”, exemplified by Mary listening to

Jesus' words, by comparison with "the active life" lived by her sister Martha who was busy in the kitchen, hence nuns and monks were "spiritually superior" to lay people who didn't have as much time to listen to Jesus' words as Mary did, and who in those days likely couldn't read anyway.

I daresay there are still some people, perhaps especially men, perhaps especially men in those churches which do not ordain women, who look at this passage that way. To be fair, some of them may not be aware of the insights in the two volume commentary on Luke's Gospel by Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., of the Catholic University of America, who points out the crucial detail in this story of *where Mary is sitting*, and i credit him with opening my eyes to this as an example of what I (not he) would call Jesus' totally unselfconscious stand as a Middle Eastern radical feminist. (How many are there of those today, never mind 2,000 years ago?)

Where is Mary sitting? This is an "open book" quiz, you can look. [Responses.] Right. She sat "at the Lord's feet." [I go and sit at the feet of the Lay Eucharistic Minister, Peter Clarke at 8 am and Karen Bemis at 10 am, and explain that in ancient times this body language would mean that I identified myself as a disciple of a teacher.]

Now, in Acts 22:3, St. Paul rolls out his credentials as a devout, highly educated jew who was "brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel," a great First Century rabbi. Paul was not using a figure of speech. he literally sat at Gamaliel's feet because such was the place for an apprentice, a **disciple** of a great teacher.

Every First Century Jew hearing today's Gospel would have gasped when the reader got to the words, "Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet."

Mary -- this is not the Blessed Virgin Mary nor Mary Magdalene, both great Saints, but Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus -- was **a disciple with a front row seat next to Jesus.**

Martha was in the kitchen. To quote "Fiddler on the roof", "*Tradition!*"

There was nothing wrong with what Martha was doing, but she was making a secondary ministry her *primary* ministry. No need to prepare a whole traditional Middle Eastern banquet; hummus and pita bread will be fine. When

Jesus comes to your house, don't spend the whole visit apart from him in the kitchen. Listen to him. *From the front row.*

If we need to understand how radical this is, just read The New York Time's coverage of the bombings of girls' schools in Pakistan. Two thousand years ago, Taliban-type attitudes towards women were mainstream. The Old Testament was progressive by Middle eastern standards, which says a lot right there. Jesus was unique.

I could spend quite a while detailing how civil law (as well as Church traditions) in supposedly Christian countries treated women as second class for centuries, but we'd have to be here until at least mid-afternoon and it's hot today. Anyway, I think many of you know, and some have lived the changes which are still even now emerging through deep struggle.

Now, let's give a shout-out to Martha, who in John's Gospel is the first of all of the disciples to "get it", to say to Jesus, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God." That was written down by another man, writing another Gospel something that no First Century Middle Eastern man -- or woman, to be fair -- could even have imagined making up. Let me also mention another Jesuit biblical scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown, whose commentary on John opened my eyes to the very prominent place of women among Jesus' disciples.

Maybe the male disciples were collected by Jesus into "the 12" because they needed more help "connecting the dots" than the women disciples did. The female disciples certainly figured out a lot. In Greek and Russian Orthodox tradition, Mary Magdalene is called "the apostle to the apostles" because in John's Gospel she was the first to tell the men on Easter Sunday morning, "I have seen the Lord."

Now, women as fully equal disciples is certainly old news at Christ Church. I mean, you have just called a woman as your rector -- for the *third time*. How many churches do you know who have had three women rectors?

Let's remember "the rule of threes". When there was one woman on the Supreme Court, she was called by some "the woman justice." When there were two, some people got them confused because, after all, they were both women and to some, I guess, "They all look alike." Now there are three women on the United States Supreme Court. It's not a big deal any more. *Finally*. They, and the guys, are *all* "just" Supreme Court justices.

Your new rector will be the third woman to be rector of Christ Church. She will be a “first” in other ways, but not that one. She is part of “the new normal” in The Episcopal Church.

But you know, there are a lot of women who have never been treated by a church the way Jesus treats women. So, I leave you with this story.

One of my former churches celebrated Scout Sunday in a big way and invited the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts who met in the Parish Hall to come. I tailored my sermon to connect especially with the 30 or so visitors, and we had a festive coffee hour afterwards. We greeted all of the visitors, and I noticed one of them was loitering around after most of the rest had left. She had brought her seven year old daughter, who found other kids to play with in the Parish Hall after the service, so her mother was able to have a conversation by herself.

So it was the mother who timidly approached me and said, “Father, can we come back next Sunday, even though it’s not Scout Sunday?” “Sure,” I said. “Well, um, Father, there’s some things I need to tell you. [Pause. Stage whisper into the microphone.] “I’m Roman Catholic.” [Pause. She trembles.] “And I’m divorced.”

“Well,” I said, matching her solemn demeanor, “If you come back and want to consider making this your church, there’s a change you’d have to make, something you’d have to get used to. You’d have to get used to being treated like a first class citizen, because there are no second class citizens here.”

Two great big tears welled up in her eyes as she looked straight at me in complete silence. I smiled and shook her hand.

She and her daughter came back the next week. And the next. And the next. Now they are Episcopalians.

How many women do you think there are outside these walls like her? And they are not just in any one church or denomination. Find some, and invite them. And maybe read them this Gospel. *Everyone* gets to sit in the front row at Jesus’ feet and be his disciple. Jesus says so.

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