

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for July 18, 2010
Lessons: Amos 8:1-7 and Luke 10:38-42

IDENTITY BRANDING AND FREEDOM

“Distracted by her many tasks.” How that line from Luke’s gospel can rankle the modern woman trying to juggle work and home, keeping up with all that must be done, day after day. It must be nice for Mary to have time to sit listening to Jesus’ teaching while Martha waits on both of them. It’s bad enough that the men get to be served without having to lift a finger to help with all the preparations or the clean-up, either, but now Martha has to serve her idle sister as well? Jesus says Mary has chosen the better part. She sure has! She’s chosen to be waited on like the princess of the realm. Is it any wonder Martha is annoyed? And Jesus says she’s “distracted.” Distracted! There’s work to be done, and she’s the one doing it — the only one doing it. And she’s distracted?

Hang on. We need to look at Luke’s story again because we have made some assumptions and painted a picture in our minds the text does not support. Who says Martha is preparing a meal or cleaning up after the three of them have eaten? Luke does not say so. For all we can tell, Martha is just busy carrying on with her routine as though Jesus were not there in her home. Can you imagine having a great and wise teacher as a guest in your home but not taking the time to listen to anything she has to say? Yes, I did that on purpose, using the pronoun “she.” These days, a great and wise teacher may be a woman as easily as a man. But not back then, not likely. The focus of the story is not on Martha’s laboring while her sister ducks out of the work that needs to be done. The focus is on Mary’s learning from Jesus while Martha ducks out, taking refuge in the busyness of her assigned role in life.

But don’t blame Martha for being inattentive to Jesus. Her society said a woman attended to a man by waiting on him when he wanted something, but otherwise kept out of sight or at least kept quiet. Women were to be seen but not heard. Jesus is breaking the prohibition against teaching the Torah to a woman, and so he has created an awkward situation for Martha. In a bit of circular illogic typical of prejudice and suppression, it was believed that women were incapable of learning the things of God, and so it was forbidden to teach them. Why the impossible needs to be forbidden strains reason but makes perfect sense to prejudice. A younger minister from a fundamentalist Presbyterian denomination explained the puzzle to me many years ago. He said he had kept his wife away from his seminary as much as possible because the discussions there would only confuse a woman. In his scheme of life, Christian women were to be told what to believe, not encouraged to ask

questions or express doubts. They were to accept, not think. Mary has stepped out of her place in her culture, and her sister disapproves. I think Jesus sees that Martha's motive is probably not so much to get help with some chore as to drag Mary back into the severely restricted role of women in that society.

By telling Martha she is unnecessarily distracted while Mary has chosen the better part, Jesus keeps the door open for Mary but also opens the door for Martha. We don't know the outcome. Maybe she left her chores and sat down with her sister to find herself anew on the terms of the kingdom of God rather than confined by the restrictions of her culture. Salvation has its roots in the concept of being brought out of tight confinement into a broader, more open space of freedom. Or maybe Martha just huffed at the unfairness of life, the recklessness of her sister, and the impropriety of this rabbi, Jesus. We don't know, but I have observed before that when the gospels leave a question open, a situation unresolved, the matter is being put to us. Will you and I answer Jesus' call to maturity and freedom?

What's wrong with doing housework and keeping a nice, welcoming home? Nothing, but that's not the question. That's just a defense of the old restrictions. The question is, *Does Mary, a woman, have the right to listen to Jesus and learn the ways and concerns of God and so to discover the validity of her own life as a person created in God's image and likeness and loved for who she is?* Does she have the right to use the capabilities God gave her, or must she suppress them because she is a woman?

Jesus prevents Martha from shaming Mary and dragging her sister back down into the suppressed state of women. His rebuke shames Martha but gently and serves as an invitation to her. Notice that Martha does not tell her sister directly to get to work but appeals to the authority of the man, thereby attempting to put Jesus in his place. She's telling him to be the proper man and assert his authority by ordering Mary to be the proper woman. Instead, Jesus supports Mary's freedom and invites Martha to find hers.

Identity branding is rightfully a design and marketing concept that has to do with a company's product lines. As an analogy, identity branding refers to the way people are put into boxes and labeled in a design that restricts freedom, divides us from each other, and fosters hostilities. The identity branding of a product is a useful concept in commerce. The identity branding of human beings is repressive, hateful, and false. A woman is a woman but also a person with many different identities and relationships. Her gender identity should not be superimposed upon every part of her life and self as a restrictive measure governing who she may be and what she must do as well as who she may not be and what she must not do. Where gender makes no difference, gender should make no difference, whether it is male or female. For a long time, men were not nurses, because . . . what? Many years ago when personal computers were still rather new, a friend who was the presbytery's stated clerk

asked me to do an experiment by using his PC to type the minutes of a presbytery meeting into a template he had made for that purpose. I did, and by the time the meeting was done, I had finished the minutes. Another friend and colleague, however, was upset about what he considered the female nature of the job I had done. His masculinity was threatened.

Jesus refuses to let Martha shame him or her sister into compliance. He will not let Mary be shamed for being a woman. Read the first three gospels and see how often Jesus rejects the identity branding imposed upon people: sinner, leper, woman, demoniac, child, foreigner, poor man, beggar, rich man, and the list goes on. He treated people as persons.

Identity branding of people is not only unfair but also dangerous to our society and the world. Countless people now blindly and unfairly equate being a Muslim with being a terrorist, when the vast majority of the world's Muslims are not at all inclined to be terrorists, any more than most Christians are inclined to join a Christian militia ready to kill people in the name of Jesus Christ. We live in a world where people branded by their religion fight each other over the competing brand names when their real issue is power, not faith.

In a current trend, I find myself fairly often being recruited to become a Christian sectarian, meaning to establish every part of my identity as exclusively and militantly Christian. I am a Christian and a Christian minister, but I am not a Christian sectarian. I am not at war with Jews or Muslims, with Hindus or Buddhists, with atheists or agnostics. I believe we Christians are called to represent and mediate God's grace to the world and its people, not to conquer the world and force its people into submission. Jesus sends us to serve not to dictate, for he came, as he has told us, "not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." He calls us to practice hospitality not hostility, to show compassion not judgment and condemnation. We need to know the nature and way of the Spirit who has been sent to guide us so we will have the right spirit in this troubled and divided world. Paul tells the Galatians "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Certainly, we need to be realistic. I hear people say as a principle, "You can be anything you want to be," and my first thought is, "You have not heard me try to sing." But the greater truth here is that we do not have to accept ourselves as identity branded. At the core of the Mary and Martha story is Jesus' liberation of individuals as well as groups from identity branding. You are, to him and so to God, a person. You are not a type that must conform to some stereotype imposed upon you by another group or by a group of your own. Jesus gives us freedom, with the proviso that we allow others to be free as well. He has opened the door. We are distracted with trying to be who others say we are and with a busyness that keeps us from thinking. Jesus calls us to grow in God's grace, to forget being identity branded and step out into freedom. Amen.