

Steve Jungkeit  
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Luke 10: 38-42; James 1: 19-27  
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### Spirit and Matter: A Few Words in Praise of Martha and Her Descendants<sup>1</sup>

Last week we encountered a trio of siblings that circulate throughout the Gospels, and we became acquainted with one in particular, Lazarus, who entered the tombs earlier than he should have. Lazarus stands for the ways each of us can be tempted to reside in a kind of spiritual or moral grave, even as Jesus invites us to come out of the tomb in order to live into the fullness of our humanity.

What I'd like to do today, and in the weeks to come, is to consider the other two siblings in that family, namely, the pair of sisters, Mary and Martha, who we glimpse in the story about Lazarus, but who we come to know better in a story that Luke recounts. If you've hung around churches at all, you're likely to know it well. Jesus comes to town, and he pays a visit to the house of Mary and Martha. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus listening to what he has to say with rapt attention. Martha, meanwhile, busies herself with the work of facilitating the visit – the cooking and cleaning and changing of sheets for their guest. And she becomes irritated that her sister isn't pulling her weight, a relational dynamic which afflicts many of us on one side or another. When Martha voices her irritation, Jesus, rather confoundingly, sides with Mary, chiding Martha for her distraction and busyness, while commending Mary for her devotion. All of those details will be familiar, but so too will be the lessons spun from the story by generations of teachers and preachers. Given the choice between the active and contemplative life, it is Mary, not Martha, who chooses the better way.

I'd like to offer a minority report to that story, not because I wish to downgrade the role of Mary. Indeed, I'll shortly contend that we need Mary, not so much for her piety than because of her commitment to aesthetic practices, and to her cultivation of senseless acts of stillness and beauty in the everyday. Rather, I wish to upgrade Martha, who has received scant attention over the years, and who has been reduced to being a busybody and a scold. I'd like to suggest, instead, that she is an emblem for all of those in the world who find it difficult to connect with God in traditional ways – through prayer or contemplation or other forms of piety. Martha is for those who have a hard time sitting still, for those who long to be active and engaged in the world, for those who pray with their hands and their feet. Martha is for those who wish to connect to a spiritual life, somehow, but who do so in ways we don't always take seriously as outlets for our spirituality – in work and in chores, yes, but also in works of social conscience. But even more than that, Martha is an emblem for what I would call a "sacred materialism," embedded in the very bodiliness of the world. She, not Mary, is the one who recognizes the obvious - that Jesus, God incarnate, has a body with a digestive tract, whose visit requires many material, and bodily necessities like food, and a warm place to sleep. Martha is the figure for all of the many theologies that insist on the flesh of God, whether one speaks of a disabled God or a mortal God, a suffering God or the God of indecent theology, which is one of the more provocative and generative theological proposals to emerge over the past twenty years. Martha speaks to those

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this sermon depends upon what I have learned from John D. Caputo's book *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), which is everywhere infused with the spirit of Martha. See especially pgs. 43-49, and 251-255.

who are justifiably suspicious of church pieties, and who long for a religion that makes a difference not in a life to come, and not merely in the warmed over hearts of the faithful, but here, now, in a time and a place where the material world is in need of a healing touch. Martha, I suggest, is a woman for all seasons, including this, our own.

Some among you will no doubt wonder about this reversal, for it cuts against the grain of the biblical text. Was it not Jesus himself who declared that Mary had chosen the better part? And hasn't that truth been affirmed over and over again by those who, wisely, sense that the world, and our very lives, transcend our material needs? Did not Jesus, in another context, tell us that humans do not live by bread alone, a statement that would fall in line with his words chiding Martha? All of that is true enough, but even so, I wish to suggest an alternative reading of the story. Here, I'll solicit the help of a medieval theologian named Meister Eckhart, for Eckhart, and the medievals in general, were sophisticated readers of the Bible. They believed, unlike the literalists and fundamentalists on the contemporary scene, that biblical stories could be read in a variety of ways, including against the grain. And so, he reads the story of Mary and Martha as an allegory of the soul, where the little town that Jesus approaches is the heart of every human being, a heart that needs to be made ready if God is to arrive. But he further believes that God – or at the level of the story, Jesus - *needs* a little town, a soul, in which to arrive, in which to be made welcome. Without that arrival within some human life, within some concrete location in some part of the world, God remains an abstraction, and thus less than real. In other words, human participation is what God requires in order to become more than an idea, or an ideal, but actual. God needs us in order to live.

But Meister Eckhart goes farther – that's a refrain in his preaching. "I go farther," he often said. He suggests that of the two sisters, it is Martha who best understands the dynamic of God requiring human participation in order to exist. By speaking Martha's name twice, Eckhart argues, it is a sign that Jesus secretly favors the way of Martha, for it is she who understands that God is born into the world as a deed. It is she who understands that that deed, the arrival of God, requires preparation if it is to occur.

It's not unlike all the preparation that went into the welcoming of Afghan refugees into town. It's all well and good to talk about the need for hospitality in such a crisis, but until there's a house to live in, with food in the refrigerator and linens on the beds, it's all just so much talk. And so, a team of dedicated volunteers busied themselves preparing the house so that the arrival of the Popal family could actually take place. By contrast, on Eckhart's reading, Mary would be the beautiful soul who hears the word, but fails to render those words incarnate, to bring God into the world through her actions and deeds. Here, Mary would stand for the one who wrings her hands and shakes her head, knowing of the need to provide refuge, but doing little to help. According to Eckhart, Mary stands for a certain idealistic withdrawal from the world, a kind of non-existent worldlessness. On our current scene, she is akin to those who insist that religion is a private affair, a personal matter of the heart, which does not involve issues of public significance.

But Martha...Martha stands for a certain realism and materialism, for she understands that if God – Jesus – is to arrive, then certain things need to happen in the material world, like the provision of food and shelter, clothing and warmth, friendship and medicines and all the rest. According to Meister Eckhart, Jesus understands that dynamic all the way down, and he blesses it.

What I'd like to do in the time that remains is to take this reading of Martha and to expand upon it for our particular moment. If the story of Martha's brother, Lazarus, was about

rediscovering our moral conscience, the story of Martha, retold with the help of Meister Eckhart, can be read as a parable of ecology, and of our responsibility to the planet entrusted to our care.

Martha discloses a concern for a certain materiality circulating throughout the Gospels, and indeed throughout the entirety of the Bible. That concern has to do with embodiment and the sacred character of all matter, but it also extends to the sacred character of animals and plants, and with the natural elements too – the wind and the rain, the sea and the sun and the moon and the darkness. James Joyce once quipped that we were all a mixture of Hebraic and Greek thought – jewgreek he called us – but we could and should revise that formulation to include the naturalism of the Bible, the so-called “pagan” elements that circulate throughout. We are all, we might say, Judeo-Pagan, as well as Judeo-Christian-Greek. I use that word, “pagan” somewhat advisedly, for it has often been deployed as a way of rooting out those natural elements, and it has been used as a means of persecuting the religions and peoples oriented around them. But Jesus – was he not driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he communed with the wild animals? Was he not a healer intricately attuned to the animals and the elements? Did he not describe himself as a shepherd, and we, his followers, as animals – sheep? Is that not the very earthy and earthly domain favored by Martha and all her spiritual progeny?

That’s why, as young people marched in Glasgow this past week, urging upon world leaders a more vigorous response to the climate catastrophe that is upon us, I understood them as speaking and acting in the spirit of Martha, and in the spirit of a certain Judeo-Pagan element already at play in the Bible, to say nothing of many other ancient traditions. Let me share a few of the things they brought to our attention. In events held outside the main halls of the conference, young people from Brazil and Ecuador, children of the Amazon, took center stage, speaking about how climate disasters were disrupting and destroying their habitat. Another young woman, from Kenya, detailed how two rainy seasons did not take place, and how that had left some 2 million Kenyans facing starvation. Young people from Samoa noted that even though they were under threat from rising seas and powerful hurricanes, they had not given into despair, but were there to seek comprehensive change. All of those young people were rightly critical of the fact that some 500 fossil fuel lobbyists attended the COP26 talks. They pointed out that of any country in the world, the United States was, by far, the country most responsible for the world’s carbon pollution. And they observed that while there was talk of reducing carbon emissions among the world’s most affluent countries, there was no corresponding plan to phase out fossil fuels, which includes winding down extraction of those resources, and closing down existing production sites. With all that in mind, they launched what they called a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, modeled after similar attempts to do the same with nuclear weapons. Writing from Glasgow, Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*, quipped that it was the first time in his experience that the delegates to the COP were more unnerved by young people than by the press.<sup>2</sup>

They are all, I suggest, descendants of Martha. Like Martha, they are those who sense the importance of the material world, of embodiment, and the enormity of the tasks before us all. While there are those who talk, and who remain trapped within the realm of the ideal, like Mary, they are the ones who sense the need to get to work, to actualize and make real what has heretofore remained abstract. But they are like Martha in another way as well. Just as Martha readies her household for the arrival of the Divine, so too these climate activists are readying us all for the arrival of the future, for the arrival of our children, our grandchildren, and their

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<sup>2</sup> The quotes and stories about COP 26 can all be found in *The Nation*, “Youth Activists Fight for Their Future at COP 26,” by Tina Gerhardt, November 12, 2021.

grandchildren too. That is, after all, the arrival of a certain sacred and holy “other,” all those who, like Jesus in the little town, will shortly arrive on a small and fragile planet. Standing behind them all, I sense the spirit of Martha, urging us all to make ready for those soon to arrive, for those we can scarcely anticipate just yet.

Thus far, I suspect I have remained in the realm of Mary, abstracted and ideal, rather than real and concrete, at least regarding your life and mine. And so let me offer a brief word about what it might be like to practice the way of Martha in our world today. You know all the usual admonitions and prohibitions, and so I won’t repeat them here. Too often, it all winds up sounding like the Puritans of old, or at least a popular and probably unfair image of the Puritans: dour, joyless, grey, and ascetic, as if the best we can imagine is to shuffle off into a punishing monastic cell. God forbid. Yes, there are some practices we need to shift, and yes, there are some things we could do without, but if that pinched and uptight Puritanism represents the way of Martha, count me out.

Instead, what if it meant something provocative, intellectually exciting, and deeply pleasurable? What if it meant curbing our use of fossil fuels, yes, but also learning to love some of the indigenous spiritual practices such as those found at Green Grass, or in the African-based traditions found in Haiti? What if it meant recognizing those traditions as a gift to the world, as well as a gift offered to you personally? And what if it meant paying attention to the ways our own biblical and theological texts converge with those traditions in their reverence for the sacred, shimmering character of the natural world? Start there. But don’t stop there. What if the way of Martha also means making a point to engage in acts of “celebratory ecology,” as our friend Paul Spitzer puts it, spending a portion of our day within a forest, or a field, or along the sea, or on a river. We’re all of us busy, and our lives are overfull. But we also happen to live in a special place, ecologically speaking, and not to notice, or to celebrate it, is akin to casting pearls before swine. So, let us notice it, and celebrate it. But don’t stop there either. Because the way of Martha has to do with flesh, flesh which needs to be cared for and loved. And so, turn off your screens for a time. Why not care for your flesh, and for the flesh of another if you are so privileged? Why not let the soft animal of your body love what it loves, as Mary Oliver once said? Why not eat and drink things that are salubrious, but that sometimes also make your jaws drop from sheer disbelief and wonder? Why not let our senses – our hearing and our taste, our sense of touch and our sight, even our sense of smell, be dazzled? Is that too not a form of celebratory ecology, the way of Martha for a dematerialized, virtual, and disembodied present? Let us abstain, as best we can, from that which we must. But for each abstention, let us replace it with a form of material and bodily celebration, for that too is the way of Martha.

But what of the God who depends upon us in order to exist in the world, the God who becomes real by becoming a deed? Sometimes, it is a matter of preparing the way for what is to come, sweeping the house, like Martha, or marching in Glasgow, like all the young activists. Other times, I suspect, it’s more like discovering something that has been there all along, waiting for us to notice, waiting for our participation.

In that spirit, I conclude with a passage from Alice Walker’s book *The Color Purple*, one I’ve mentioned before from this pulpit. Walker deserves to be read as one of the finest theologians America has produced. But she also deserves to be understood in the spirit of a certain Martha – in love with the earthy, material, fleshy matter of the world. In the story, two women, Celie and Shug, get to talking about God. Celie has long ago stopped feeling anything for God, for in her understanding, God is cold, distant, and abstract. Shug, a flamboyant blues singer, isn’t having it, and she tells Celie of her own spiritual awakening. “God isn’t a picture

show. It's not something you look at apart from everything else, including yourself. My first step from the old (god) was trees," she says. "Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day I was sitting alone and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it came to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed," she tells Celie. The secret to this vision of God, the secret to this worldly and earthly and material spirituality, she tells Celie, is found in pleasure, and in joy. "God loves everything you love, and a mess of stuff you don't...I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it...People think pleasing God is all God cares about," she says. "But any fool living in the world can see that God is always trying to please us back."<sup>3</sup>

For those of us drawn to the spirit of Martha, for those of us attracted to the material and earthly realm that she inhabits, and for those of us seeking a faithful way to live upon a suffering planet, perhaps the place to start is just there, right there: to let the earth, which is to say, God, love us. And then to actively, passionately, carefully, in the spirit of that same Martha, to start loving it back.

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<sup>3</sup> Walker, Alice, *The Color Purple*, (New York: Simon and Schuster/Pocket Paperbacks, 1982), pg. 203.