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As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

Luke 10:38

Although I grew up in the church—I was raised Roman Catholic, went to mass every Sunday, attended a Catholic grade school and high school, had religious instruction every weekday of my life for 12 years—even though I was *steeped* in church, and knew the big biblical story lines, there aren't all that many *individual* scriptures I remember hearing from that time. You know, scriptures that really stood out for me and captured my attention.

There are a few, though.

I can remember my mother complaining every time that passage from Paul was read, in the letter to the Ephesians, about wives being submissive to their husbands. She had a *lot* to say about that, especially directed at my dad.

I remember the line in Luke's gospel about how it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (However the reason I remember that particular line is in no way theological.... I was in religion class, maybe 3rd grade, and the teacher was quizzing us on what we'd heard at mass that day. I suspect she noticed that I wasn't paying attention—most likely I was reading a book tucked in my lap—and so she sprung the question on me, “what was today's

gospel about?” Somehow, I was able to pull the line about the camel and the rich person out of thin air.)

And the last scripture that I recall so clearly is today’s story about Martha and Mary. I had lots of thoughts and big feelings about this one, all having to do with the binary way it was presented. In the “are you a Martha or a Mary” debate, I was definitely a Martha—always comfortable in the kitchen—and my sister Mary, by default I guess, was a Mary. I’m not sure how much of a contemplative she was, but she was an artist, even as a little kid, and her art projects occasionally took her to the basement, just about the time the post-dinner chores needed to be done.

My analysis of the Mary/Martha scripture didn’t go much deeper than annoyance that my sister seemed to have found a biblical way to get out of clearing the table and drying the dishes from time to time. I liked being in the kitchen with my mom, helping with food prep and cooking, but I felt the unfairness of shouldering responsibilities that were supposed to be shared, and so I resonated with Martha’s complaint that everything was falling to her.

When I became a priest, I looked forward to digging into this particular story, uncovering more depth than a sisterly squabble about “it’s not fair.” I’ve been ordained for 16 years, and preaching close to 20 years, so I’ve had six or seven opportunities to have this particular passage come up in the 3 year lectionary cycle. And I have to say, every time it does, and I think about it and look to the expert theological commentators for some insight, I remain decidedly dissatisfied.

The commentators seem to fall into a few distinct camps, either suggesting that Jesus was holding up Mary's contemplative stance, of sitting and listening at Jesus' feet, over and above Martha's active service of hospitality. Or, that Jesus wasn't really dissing Martha's hospitality, but taking her to task for overfunctioning, and maybe going a bit overboard with her preparations, making it all about her. Or, that Jesus was chiding Martha about her *judgment* of her sister, and allowing her distraction about food prep to distance herself from her own interior spirituality and grounding.

Just once, I want to read a theologian advocating for Martha to have a pushback moment like the Canaanite woman in Matthew's gospel, who asks for Jesus' help and when he says no, she replies that even the dogs under the table get the crumbs.

When Jesus says, Martha, you're so distracted! Look at how nicely Mary is sitting there, listening to me. And I want to hear Martha say, "You're darned right I'm worried and distracted. Y'all show up, the whole lot of you, and while I'm glad to see you it's HARD to pull together an impromptu banquet on the fly, even if I simplified things. How about, instead of lecturing me, you get your friends off the sofa in the living room, get everyone to pitch in, and then we can all eat and talk together."

Which makes me wonder...maybe Martha only picked on Mary because that's all she felt brave enough to do (even though she really wanted to take all of them to task.)

[Sigh.] I'm unsatisfied. However, perhaps my argument isn't with Jesus, but with the writer of Luke's gospel—what details he chose to put in, what things he left out. We *finally* get a story where two women are the main characters, and the only thing that comes out of it is Jesus refereeing a sisterly squabble? It's not enough for me. The story feels thin. Even in the way that Mary is presented...sitting quietly and passively at Jesus' feet. Is that really how the scene went down? I want to hear if Mary asked questions, had some give and take with Jesus.

And where, in this story, is the Jesus from last week, the one who told the parable of the Good Samaritan, with its unexpected plot twists and turns that called out hypocrisy and stereotypes? Where is the Jesus who challenges the status quo, the systemic inequities and injustices? The one who calls us out, who challenges us to consider the outsider, the overlooked, the demonized, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, those without structural power? Where in today's passage is Jesus the script flipper?

As I was thinking about Martha and Mary, and what flipping the script might mean for those ancient women, and in turn, what it might mean for us today....as I was considering those thoughts, a video came across my social media feed that was put together by a Dutch company earlier this year, in March, in honor of International Women's Day.

In the video, an interviewer, a woman, poses questions to several men, managers, leaders in the companies they work for. A caption explains that the questions the interviewer is posing are word-for-word questions

that have been asked of female managers and leaders in their jobs for forever.

For example...

- “Have you ever been asked,” she says to one man, “to just smile and look pretty or smile and just say nothing in a meeting with a customer?” *No, no*, the man says.
- Do you think that your looks helped you getting promoted or moving up to your current position, looking so good? By the way, I do love your shoes. Are they designer, or a particular brand that you really like?
- Do your hormones sometimes get in the way?
- Do you sometimes wonder whether you’ve been chosen for this position because you’re a man?
- How do you handle being assertive in your job without being perceived as aggressive or bitchy?

The men’s responses range from uncomfortable laughter to head shakes to rejecting the premise of the inquiries. One man says, “That’s a question that I find it very hard to relate to, because that’s not a situation I’ve been in.”

She asks them what they think about the line of questioning. One man says that it’s showing him “the difference in what (one) experiences as a man vs. a woman.” Another says, “It really, really, really feels uncomfortable, I...feel it in my body.” And another concludes that, “Hearing

these things still happen, it made me also feel that maybe I'm more privileged than I thought."

They go on to talk about what they want to do to change the world so that their children never have to face such derogatory, demeaning, and discriminatory questions.

The tag line for the video says this: *male leaders (were) asked the...questions...female leaders have faced for decades. Suddenly, what once seemed "normal" sounds uncomfortable. Because it should. This isn't about reversing roles. It's about revealing the imbalance we've tolerated for far too long.* The tag line concludes, *Flip the script: be an ally.*¹

If you've followed the news this past week, you know that one story which has gotten huge attention is all about the Jeffrey Epstein case files, and when or whether information contained in those files will be released to the public. Epstein, as you no doubt know, was a wealthy and well-connected financier, as well as a convicted sex offender and trafficker of young girls. Every news outlet was talking about this story this week, with lots of animated discussion about what should be brought to light and who all might be involved or implicated, and the political ramifications of those revelations.

Amidst the swirl of controversy and high emotion, I heard one script flipper. At the end of the presentation of his opinion piece on MSNBC about this news item, journalist Lawrence O'Donnell asked his listeners to refocus their attention, and think not about the political fallout, but about the

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kpwbjHAmA&t=26s>

young girls who were used, victimized, and trafficked, whose pain can never be undone. That's the point of this story, O'Donnell was saying, that's what is most important.

How can we be script flippers? What are the narratives we hear and just take in, because they've been part of our culture for so long? It's hard, sometimes, to see outside of ourselves, outside our own experiences. Whose voices aren't we hearing? Who isn't at the table? How can I look beyond my privileges to see or hear the other side of the script?

Over the years of me sharing my thoughts from the pulpit, I've had a handful of people tell me of their unease at hearing "politics" preached in church. For me, though, the intersection of politics and religion is not about endorsing candidates or partisanship. It's about asking, how should we organize our common life together, in alignment with the way that Jesus lived and moved in the world?

When we consider our families, our schools, our systems of commerce, healthcare, housing, and government, we need to be asking, who has voice or not? Who has agency or not? Whose problems garner attention and whose get overlooked or go unfunded?

Who can walk down the street, pretty confident that they won't be picked up by ICE officials in masks and camouflage, and who is terrified to leave their home? Who can go their whole life never wondering, like those guys in the video, whether someone will question whether they got the job because they were pretty? And who has been on the receiving end of having complete strangers comment about their bodies, their clothing, the way they wear their hair, and been asked, why don't you smile more?

Who never has to give a thought as to their bodily autonomy, and who is at risk of being exploited and trafficked ? (And can we take some time, please, to really consider why in the world trafficking a 14 year old girl is ever anything one human being thinks to do to another?)

The political ethos of Jesus asks us to consider, who are we forgetting? Who have we been taught to dehumanize? Who don't we see at all?

When Martha complained to Jesus that "it's not fair" that all the work that day fell to her, I wanted Jesus to say, "I hear you. Let's figure out how to share the load for this meal today, and then let's sit down and talk about what else isn't fair in the world, and what we're going to do about it."

We were created as creatures connected to one another, beholden to one another. That original script gets flipped from time to time; we need to flip it back again. *Amen.*