

July 18, 2010  
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral  
Pentecost VII  
Proper 11

You have Chosen the Best Thing

The day after tomorrow, July 20,  
is an important anniversary for us Episcopalians.  
Do any of you remember what happened on that date  
36 years ago,  
an occasion which was to change forever  
The Episcopal Church of The United States of America?  
It happened pretty quietly at the time, but the repercussions  
still ripple around the world.  
On July 20, 1974, at The Church of The Advocate  
in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,  
eleven women were ordained to the priesthood.  
They were ordained by several retired bishops,  
men who had little to lose because they were retired,  
bishops of courage who had long believed

that women and men together are God's disciples,  
that women and men together can -- and should --  
be called to leadership roles in the church.

These women, and the male bishops who ordained them,  
were held up as heroines and heroes by some of us,  
and excoriated as mavericks, to put it kindly,  
by others among us.

There followed on the part of some in The Episcopal Church  
a great hue and cry:  
sputterings and cries of "dies irae" --  
day of judgment, day of wrath.

During the subsequent uproar, which continues in some  
branches of The Anglican Communion today,  
most of the newly-ordained women priests  
were barred from functioning as priests.

The primary liturgical functions of the priest are to consecrate  
bread and wine at God's altar,  
and to proclaim God's forgiveness after the people have made  
their confession.

How ironic that those who opposed women's ordination  
could not forgive those ordained women,  
and therefore would not agree to receive forgiveness from God  
through the priestly act of absolution, if given by a woman.

The Philadelphia Eleven, as they came to be called,  
were spat upon, they were scratched,  
they were, as was Jesus during his passion,  
despised and rejected.

Only thirty-six years later, less than two generations,  
most of us wonder what all the fuss was about.

What a gift to the church, the gender balance of leadership  
has proven to be!

And what a hullabaloo we are observing this week  
at the statement from the vatican  
published in The New York Times,  
that any Roman Catholic bishop  
who ordains a woman to the priesthood  
is to be punished in the same manner as  
priests who sin as pedophiles!

It saddens me, this blindness on the part of the exceedingly male

Vatican hierarchy,  
this blindness to the richness that women clergy  
would bring to Roman Catholic leadership.

Three summers ago on July 28

I joined an amazingly enthusiastic congregation  
at a United Church of Christ church in Gresham  
to witness and support the ordination of a woman  
named Toni Tortorilla

to the Roman Catholic Priesthood.

The bishop who ordained Toni,

The Rt. Rev. Patricia Fresen,

impressed me as a woman of deep faith and contagious joy.

Bishop Fresen is not recognized by

The RC Church as a bishop,

but those of us who experienced her faith, joy,

and intelligence,

recognized that God is doing a new thing

among our brother and sister Roman Catholics,

just as God has been doing a new thing

during these thirty-six years

as we women have been ordained and welcomed

as clergy in our denomination.

Bishop Fresen serves God in central Europe

where she continues to ordain women

who discern a call to ordination,  
and where she continues excommunicated and shunned  
by the RC hierarchy.

So are we surprised that this week The Vatican leadership  
made a public statement that those RC bishops  
who dare to ordain women priests  
will be excommunicated, punished as severely as those bishops  
who have harbored pedophile priests?

Does it calibrate?

In today's gospel story we hear once again  
the beloved story of Martha and Mary,  
Martha and her sister Mary who are  
serving God in two ways:  
Martha by preparing food and setting the table  
and offering hospitality to Jesus,

and Mary, her sister, who sits at Jesus' feet in rapt attention,  
hearing and absorbing Jesus' teaching,  
*learning* about discipleship.

In one Bible commentary we are told that in this story  
Jesus is breaking three taboos.

First he is described as perhaps being alone in a house  
with two women who are not his relatives.

(I've always assumed that the disciples  
were gathered around Jesus' feet along with Mary.  
But nowhere does the text state whether they are there.)

Second, he allows a woman to serve him  
(which we think is perfectly normal, but not so in his day!

Women did the background work,  
and men welcomed the guests and played host,  
just as did Abraham in our story from Genesis  
while Sarah remained hidden in the tent).

And third, he teaches a woman in her own house.

For Jews of Jesus' day these actions are more than outrageous.

Think about that as we consider the story.

Luke tells us that Martha *welcomes* Jesus into her home.

She is the consummate hostess:

while Jesus teaches in the living room

Martha rushes around preparing.

Can't you just see her?

I like to imagine Martha hustling the servants

to decant the very best wine for her dear friend Jesus,

to gather the ripest dates

and pull from the oven the delicious bread

baked for this occasion.

Martha is showing her love and respect for Jesus

by attending to many tasks.

And Mary sits at Jesus' feet,

mesmerized by the rabbi's words.

In a way Jesus insults Martha by telling her that her sister

“has chosen the better part  
which will not be taken away from her.”

“Better part” has also been translated  
“good portion,” which is less judgmental.

But remember all the sermons of Jesus, all the parables,  
all the stories we'll be hearing through the summer  
are about discipleship.

I suspect that Jesus was perfectly happy to have  
Martha arranging the hospitality details.

And I suspect his comment about Mary  
“choosing the best part”  
or “the good portion”

was all about his complimenting her  
on wanting to hear his teaching.

The Martha/Mary story has often been used  
to denigrate housework and to show that the life of the mind,  
Mary's deep interest in listening to Jesus talk,  
is a far, far better thing.

I prefer to take the story as hyperbole;

Jesus so often spoke in hyperbole.

I suggest that his statement about Mary's choice  
is not meant to be taken literally.

But think how revolutionary his comment is:  
this woman has done a good thing by listening to me  
even as she is breaking all tradition  
for the behavior of a faithful Jewish woman.

Mary is behaving ***inappropriately***.

“inappropriate behavior”---

This week I heard of contemporary Jewish women  
who are now breaking the frozen mold of gender expectations.

Have you heard about The Women at the Wall?

Some observant Jewish women  
have been gathering at the holy site of the western wall  
in Jerusalem, the wailing wall,  
where on the first day of every Jewish month only men  
are allowed to pray, wail aloud, and read Torah.

These women have chosen to challenge orthodox Jewish law  
by wearing the traditional men's shawl  
for prayer and Torah reading.

One of them was arrested for carrying to the wall the Torah,  
the sacred text of Judaism  
which is the first five books of Hebrew scripture,  
and which for orthodox Jews may only be carried to the wall  
by a man.

Arrested for carrying the holy scriptures!

Those opposed express great horror at these flagrant acts

breaking long-held patriarchal tradition.

But a Jerusalem woman who was interviewed stated that she deeply hopes that her daughters will be able to practice Judaism more freely when they reach adulthood.

People have shouted at them,  
“you cannot change the Jewish faith.”

*You cannot change...*

Think how Jesus' gospel message changed the world!

We must be open to change in order to be alive.

Indeed, in the book of Exodus we're challenged to “choose life”

-- to live, and that means to change.

Not to change is to freeze, to die.

Today at the 8 o'clock service we baptized a little girl

who will grow up thinking it is perfectly normal

that some of her priests are women,

others are men.

Less than two generations ago

this was untrue in our denomination.

Baby Julia must be told when she is older  
of the many ways injustice has been challenged

by people of faith and courage

throughout history.

When Julia will hear the Mary/Martha story

I hope she will learn that life was very different

in Jesus' day,

that the two sisters were breaking all sorts of tradition

in order to be faithful women.

And I pray that when Baby Julia is a grown woman

some of the customs we are blind to

which result in injustice and inequality,

will have been changed.

Jesus demonstrates that living without fear  
of convention leads to a life of fullness.

Jesus calls us to better parts,  
good portions,  
some of which we have never dreamed.

What injustices do you suppose will have changed  
in a couple of generations,  
injustices to which we're currently blind???

Amen.