

## MARY AND MARTHA'S NIGHT OUT

The Rev. Barbara E. Davis  
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Genesis 18:1-8; Luke 10:38-42

Almost fifteen years ago, the Sundance Channel launched a series called *Iconoclasts*. The channel was searching for its own niche in interview style shows. Something to compete with Oprah and James' Lipton's *Inside the Actor's Studio*.<sup>i</sup> The idea for *Iconoclasts* was to make unique pairings of persons and bring them into conversation together. Usually the pair included an influential celebrity of the time and a visionary or inspirational person. Subjects might include fashion and food, journalism and sports, music and acting, and the two would discuss each person's biography, creative processes and passions.

Some of the pairings were Mario Batali and Michael Stipe, Madeleine Albright and Ashley Judd, Venus Williams and Wyclef Jean. I always liked the idea of this show and couldn't help making pairings in my mind of Biblical characters and religious leaders who would be fun to interview. Mary and Martha would have been a great *Iconoclasts* pairing. Even though they know each other, and indeed are sisters, there is so much unsaid between them.

Mary and Martha strike me as friends in the deepest sense of the word. In these days, where the chaos of the world pulls us apart little by little, the sacredness and hospitality of friendship is worth our consideration. If we are truly ready to be called up to offer hospitality to strangers – as we may be today, and surely some of our brothers and sisters will be as ICE raids continue around our country and residents in Louisiana face tropical storm Barry, we can begin with a deepening knowledge of how to treat those people we know.

Friendship, in myriad forms, is the fabric of our community, although we talk about it as a form of discipleship much less often. It's natural that some people through common interest and ideas would become friends, either over time or sometimes in a very short amount of time we find ourselves in an attraction of friendship with others. Friendship has also been on the hearts and minds of many of great thinkers throughout the centuries, from Aristotle to Wollstonecraft, from Emerson to Rich.

Maria Popova, who writes a blog called *BrianPickings* that Bob told me about a while back, tackles the subject of friendship frequently. She presents a good summary of both her interest and concerns in these words:

*I often puzzle over the nature, structure, and function of [friendship](#) in human life — a function I have found to be indispensable to my own spiritual survival and, I suspect, to that of most human beings...I found myself concerned with the commodification of the word "friend" in our culture.*

*We call "friends" peers we barely know beyond the shallow roots of the professional connection, we mistake mere mutual admiration for friendship, we name-drop as "friends" acquaintances associating with whom we feel reflects favorably on us in the eyes of others, thus rendering true friendship vacant [of [Emerson's exacting definition](#).] We have perpetrated a corrosion of meaning by overusing the word and overextending its connotation, compressing into an imperceptible difference the vast existential expanse between mere acquaintanceship and friendship [in the proper [Aristotelian sense](#).]<sup>ii</sup>*

Popova goes on to build what she calls a taxonomy of friendship, based on the work of other philosophers on levels of personhood. In Popova's thinking, friends are the inner most circles of people we are close to in our lives. Circling them in concentric groups are kindred spirits, people we know and like, and acquaintances. She goes on to suggest:

*Some kindred spirits become friends in the fullest sense — people with whom we are willing to share, not without embarrassment but without fear of judgment, our gravest imperfections and the most anguishing instances of falling short of our own ideals and values. The concentrating and consecrating force that transmutes a kinship of spirit into a friendship is emotional and psychological intimacy. A friend is a person before whom we can strip our ideal self in order to reveal the real self, vulnerable and imperfect, and yet trust that it wouldn't diminish the friend's admiration and sincere affection for the whole self, comprising both the ideal and the real.<sup>iii</sup>*

The stories of the Bible teach us about friendship, in a host of interesting ways. One of the richest examples we have is in the relationship of Mary and Martha, which we largely learn about through their interactions with Jesus. The passage that Bob read to us from the community of Luke about Mary and Martha's responses to Jesus' teachings and the interaction of Jesus with Martha about her request often leaves us unsettled.

Some of you have reflected with great passion your resonance with Martha and disappointment with Jesus. The story makes it clear that this is Martha's house, so she likely is either older or has more financial means. Interestingly, Martha doesn't take up her issues of wanting help with the preparations directly with Mary, but rather appeals directly to Jesus.

There are those who support Mary and find this affirmation by Jesus of her listening and learning an affirmation of woman's right to be part of the community of discipleship. Unfortunately, that affirmation that women are allowed to study and be part of the inner circle of disciples is still needed in some Christian communities and so I'm grateful that is not taken away, but what is taken away from Martha? And what does this interlude tell us about the relationship between the two women?

I suspect that their relationship is wounded by this interaction. Things can be rough between sisters in my experience, but they can also be rough between friends. The conflict between Mary and Martha may feel like it has been brewing, and yet again, maybe it was unexpected. I can imagine Mary saying to Martha later, "why didn't you just ask me?" a violation of the silence of friendships that one should know what the other needs. And I've always wondered if Martha wants help with preparations or wants to be sitting at Jesus' feet listening as well. Maybe it's both. Mary and Martha sure need a night out to talk this situation through. Yet their friendship has a perseverance in the imaginations of the gospel communities.

The community that gives us John's gospel presents Mary and Martha as well, and in fact introduces their brother Lazarus. In the other most memorable of stories about Mary and Martha, we see a strong theological debate about the resurrection from Martha's perspective. Oddly enough, it is not Mary, who sat and listened to Jesus' teachings, who presents the theological argument with Jesus, but Martha, who was bustling around in the kitchen.

Martha was clearly no slouch in terms of theological debate. It gets laid out in the gospel of John, chapter 11. You might remember the story, it happens when Jesus delays going to Lazarus' side after he falls ill. Lazarus dies and when Jesus arrives several days later, it is Martha who meets him on the road.

*<sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.<sup>la</sup> Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (John 11:20-27, NRSV)*

But Martha doesn't just keep this to herself, she goes back to the house and shares with Mary about her conversation with Jesus. There is a directness and a gentleness in this interaction.

*<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." <sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup> He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:28-37, NRSV).*

Mary's interaction with him in this story conveys the sense of emotion and his clear connectedness to both of these women and their brother. What seems to be submerged is Martha and Mary's clear affection for not only their brother, but for each other. They both tell Jesus the same heart-breaking disappointment in the same words. They are both willing to be vulnerable and imperfect with each other, without fear, and following Popova's definition, truly friends.

The religious educator Maria Harris suggests within forms of community, there are tasks which include presence, receptivity and responsibility. Friendship embraces these tasks and strengthens our search for belonging, living and sharing. The task of presence, as Harris understands it, is to "see other people seeing us, which is to say appreciating, valuing, and cherishing."<sup>iv</sup> The other side of presence is receptivity, which is a readiness to listen to be still and bring our "contemplative powers to bear" in our relationships.

Harris gives us an insight into not only Mary and Martha, but to ourselves. Looking at Mary and Martha through the lens of friendship, we can see more in their relationship than the tension. We witness a true hospitality in their friendship. We glimpse a friendship that embodies presence, receptivity, and responsibility.

The strengths and weaknesses of both are exposed. Martha's attention to detail, her passion for theology, her willingness to name what she sees. Mary is attentive, a good listener, passionate about her relationships, willing to share her emotions.

Their witness of friendship poses for us a question, who are these friends in our life? Who are to us, Mary and Martha? In this community and beyond, you all witness to this type of friendship all the time. You visit each other in the hospital, you accompany each other, you share stories of friendships, in good times and bad. You cherish not only those memories, but the present – the right here, the right now. We are called through our friendships to deepen ourselves, even when that witness is hard, whether is through sadness, loss, disappointment or disagreement. And when that witness of friendship is a blessing because it brings back loving memories, or we suddenly realize we are in a revelatory moment of understanding what the friends in our lives have meant to us, how they have shaped us, how we have shaped them, how they have loved us into being.

Those revelatory moments show us the hospitality of friendship is no small thing. It stands not only within our religious traditions but within our religious experiences. It binds us and holds us in our discipleship. We need to take our friendships as a serious part of our discipleship. We need to nurture those relationships, mourn the painful parts and embrace the creative processes our friendships nurture.

Friendship teaches us about hospitality, giving and receiving and it is the thread that weaves our communities and families together. And heaven knows, we need to be bound together right now. Mary and Martha give us one example of this better part, friendship, and it won't be taken away.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.documentary.org/feature/twos-company-new-iconoclasts-series-pairs-visionaries-sundance-channel>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/08/16/friendship/>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Harris, Maria. 1989. *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. p. 85.