

All Out of Proportion
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Mary R. Brownlow

There is a wonderful 16th century painting by Vincenzo Campi entitled “Christ in the House of Mary and Martha.” In the foreground sits Martha, surrounded by all the fixings for a feast: cabbages and carrots, onions and artichokes, a variety of dead poultry, dozens of fish, and a little wild boar hanging up by his feet. She has got her work cut out for her, and she has a rather determined look on her face. Way off in the background, in a separate room, there are two tiny figures: Jesus and Mary. You’d almost miss them behind the turkey carcass hanging from the rafters. I like to think that the artist had a sense of humor, and I often think that Luke the Evangelist did as well...not to mention the author of Genesis.

The Bible is a wonderful set of writings, and these writings are sacred for us: records of the deep and meaningful struggles of distant generations. I love to delve into the readings each week and think of ways to share them with you, bridging the 1900 year gap since the last books of the Bible were written. But every once in a while, like this week, I stop and say, “Let’s not be **too** serious.” Let’s not assume that each word and phrase and anecdote are to be read with furrowed brow and pious solemnity. Maybe we can laugh with Scripture, and learn something at the same time.

For instance: in the Genesis story of the birth of the Hebrew people, God has been promising Abraham and Sarah that they will have a child for a long time. It has been worded in a few different ways, in several different settings. Lots of time has gone by, and they are still waiting. The last time the heavenly promise was spoken, in chapter 17, Abraham fell on his face laughing. In today’s story, it is Sarah who gets the giggles. Laughter, humor: a curious response to a conversation with God. In my edition of the Bible, the footnote says, “Sarah’s laughter arises from the absurd disproportion between divine promises and human possibilities.” Our relationship with God is one of “absurd disproportion,” and sometimes, that makes people keel over laughing.

Sarah laughs, as she lurks behind the tent flap. I think of this scene as God’s indirect, or “around the corner” conversation with Sarah. She hears something crazy in her eavesdropping. She laughs inwardly: her disbelieving response to the news. Don’t these guests know how old she is? It’s true – they have not seen her, she’s been working behind the scenes. Sarah has just heard two things put side by side that made no sense, anymore: Sarah and baby. Absurd disproportion. Sometimes God does this: a kind of holy humor that’s more true than all our serious plans and all our certainty. This is the crux of the story, the moment where the human and the divine meet. “Is anything too wonderful for God?” Apparently not. But don’t worry, your laughter isn’t really a problem, Sarah. It may be disbelief, it may be sarcasm. God has a way of turning the laughable into reality. Later on, we will have this affirmed in the birth of Sarah and Abraham’s child, whom they joyfully name Isaac, which means “laughter.” And Sarah announces, “God has brought laughter to me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Nobody's seems to be laughing at Martha's house when Jesus comes to visit. But I think that the Gospel writer Luke has a wry smile on his face. A couple of weeks ago, Jesus sent out 70 of his followers to visit villages in Galilee, and They were to announce that "The Kingdom of God is very near." Now we are stuck in a family squabble. It seems that even in settings of holy hospitality, sibling rivalry rears its head. Someday, I would like to see a skit performed of this scenario, with Martha and Mary as modern teenagers: "Jesus, get her to help me. I'm doing all the work by myself. It's not **fair**. You always liked her better than me." And Mary stands behind Jesus and says, "I don't have to help. See, he likes **me** best. He likes it that I listen to him." And Jesus as the exasperated parent (or baby sitter) saying, "Everybody calm down. I'm not even that hungry, Martha, so, **chill**." I am afraid that all too often in Martha's house and elsewhere, Jesus was rolling his eyes (and maybe even laughing) at the absurd disproportion between the glory of the Kingdom of God and the human material he had to work with.

There are the two usual choices for interpreting this story: either the preacher talks about the beautiful devotion shown by Mary, as she hangs on every word Jesus says, and we are told to celebrate that kind of single-minded piety – or the preacher tries to rehabilitate Martha, and emphasize the importance of hospitality and active service. I think I have taken both of those approaches. But this week I am going to suggest a third possibility. Maybe this story is a comic commentary on the preceding verses. A lawyer has been speaking to Jesus about inheriting eternal life and how one may do this. Jesus and the lawyer agree: love God with you whole being and love your neighbor as yourself. Then we get the parable that answers the question, "And who **is** my neighbor?" – the story of the Good Samaritan. That encounter over, Jesus goes on to visit friends, and we see how well the high ideals of piety and neighborliness are live out, in a family setting. The joke is, we don't do it well at all. Jesus comes to visit, and all we do is fuss and fight. Absurd disproportion again.

The most startling part of this story, when we view it through the lens of first century Middle Eastern culture, and of many other cultures, is this radical thing: Jesus does **not** send Mary to the kitchen to help her sister. No wait, the most startling thing is that he is sharing the Good News, one-on-one with a woman, just as he might with a man. In the light of this enormous demonstration of inclusion, how could he send her out of the room? I think he'd rather go hungry than miss this opportunity to share the great Good News that Mary was very close to the Kingdom of God. I think he was probably hoping that Martha might want to listen too. As I picture Jesus willingness to turn gender roles upside down, I laugh with surprise and I ask with the angels, "Is anything too wonderful for God?"

Martha, in her urge to serve Jesus, is described as distracted and worried. Those verbs have the connotation of being pulled or dragged in different directions. She was conflicted, perhaps trying to impress Jesus with her hard work, trying to be the perfect hostess. All the while the distraction got in the way of true hospitality, which is loving attention to a guest. Martha in fact goes in the opposite direction, trying to embarrass her little sister in front of the guest, implying that Jesus doesn't care about her, and making everybody uncomfortable. Perhaps she does this with the best of intentions, perhaps it is just in her nature to keep her hands busy. But she was so busy that she did not notice that the Kingdom of God had come very near. She was so busy that she imagined that she was in charge of providing the feast, when actually all she had to do was allow the heavenly feast to come to her. There's that absurd disproportion again. You have to chuckle at Martha in the kitchen, surrounded by enough food to feed an army. There were three people at the table, and one was Jesus. Jesus, who seems to find enough food for everyone, everywhere he goes. Hello?

As long as we are re-imagining Scripture as comedy, I want to suggest that we imagine the visit of Jesus as though Mary and Martha actually got the message. And maybe then we can ask whether we will get the message. In this alternate universe, this alternate scenario, Jesus is invited in, and Mary hands him the onions and a bowl and a knife, while she starts gutting the fish. Martha is kneading the bread dough, and they both start to laugh at the way Jesus' eyes start running when he cuts the onions up. Once they finish teasing him, they ask what he's been up to lately. He tells them about the conversation with that lawyer, and then tells them the parable of the Good Samaritan. Then he asks, "And who is your neighbor, Mary and Martha?" And then he listens, as they sort out and reinterpret the verse from the Torah, really very thoughtfully, hands busy, but minds just as busy. In no time at all, with little or no worry, distracted by the wonderful conversation, supper's ready. They start laughing again: they are amazed at how easy it was. But they shouldn't be. The Kingdom of God was so near. And is anything too wonderful for God?