

**“Martha Served”****John 12.1–11****The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 25 March 2007**

Last week I spoke a bit about the idea the idea of “extravagant welcome” – the welcome God extends to each of us and the way we are meant to greet one another with arms outstretched. And there is no better example of this than the story of a woman taking a costly jar of ointment and massaging it into the feet of Jesus. It occurs in different forms in all four canonical gospels. In John’s account, Mary of Bethany extends the extravagant welcome to Jesus, and it is Judas Iscariot (the archetypal bad guy) who criticizes her action, saying that the perfumed ointment could have been sold to give to the poor. Again, we are confronted, and perhaps affronted, by the extravagant welcome, which is then confirmed by Jesus. The story, of course, foreshadows Jesus’ death. But, I’m going to take a different tack today.

I know that from the title of this sermon – “Martha Served” – that some of you may think this is a homily about Martha Stewart. I’m sorry to disappoint you.

Like it or not, women often get pegged with the scut work, preparing food, cleaning the house, changing the diapers, and taking out the garbage. It is not glorious work...nor a service given recognition...nor work many of us aspire to do. But someone – male or female – has to do it, otherwise households don’t function. And for millennia, people (mostly men) have pointed to the example of Martha, the sister of Lazarus, as the model of domestic service, encouraging women in their midst to be just like her: servile, voiceless, and nearly invisible.

The church has used Martha as an example of faithful service, in the past performed by nuns who did a lot of the menial tasks that one might imagine Martha doing. Luke’s portrayal of the Mary and Martha relationship is even clearer than John’s: “Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’”<sup>1</sup>

I know it’s hard to imagine, but some people actually use scripture to reinforce the status quo and their own privileged place in society: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters.”<sup>2</sup> And if you want to keep a good woman down, you can point to the gospels and epistles to illustrate your point.

However, most of us don’t remember that in John’s story, Martha had previously been outside discussing resurrection with Jesus and also making statements about her faith in him as the Messiah. So, John doesn’t portray her as quite the domestic paragon that Luke does. Still, the scriptures remain.



Those who don’t think that women have a place in ministry might quote one the Pastoral Epistles “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”<sup>3</sup> Or if you prefer to hear it

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10.38–42

<sup>2</sup> Eph. 6.5

<sup>3</sup> 1 Tim 2.11–12

from Paul: “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”<sup>4</sup> ... It is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

You wouldn't have to walk far to find a church that won't ordain women, whether it's John the 23rd or First Baptist.

I would suggest to you that what will happen in this sanctuary at 3:30 this afternoon might be viewed as a subversive or heretical act by some Christians here in Fort Collins. After all, if women can't even speak in church, how could they teach and preach and perform the sacraments?

Some of you know that in 1853, our Congregationalist forbears were the first Christians to ordain a woman in modern history. Antoinette Brown Blackwell began to speak publicly in the services of her local Congregational church at the age of nine. She graduated from Oberlin College in 1847 and completed its theological seminary in 1850, though she was not granted her degree, because of her sex. Oberlin later conferred upon her Master of Arts and Doctor of Divinity degrees. What must they have been thinking 154 years ago in ordaining a woman? We shouldn't forget that even our liberal Episcopalian brothers and sisters didn't ordain women until 1980.

Karen King, a New Testament professor at Harvard, is one of the scholars who maintains that women played key leadership roles in the early church...thousands of years before Antoinette Brown Blackwell. She writes that “Women's prominence did not, however, go unchallenged. Every variety of ancient Christianity that advocated the legitimacy of women's leadership was eventually declared heretical, and evidence of women's early leadership roles was erased or suppressed.

“This erasure has taken many forms. Collections of prophetic oracles were destroyed. Texts were changed. For example, at least one woman's place in history was obscured by turning her into a man! In Romans 16:7, the apostle Paul sends greetings to a woman named Junia. He says of her and her male partner Andronicus that they are “my kin and my fellow prisoners, prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ before me.” Concluding that women could not be apostles, textual editors and translators transformed Junia into Junias, a man.”<sup>5</sup> So, perhaps Paul is not the misogynist we commonly assume him to be. “In Christ...there is neither male nor female.”



Things have changed since the days of Junia. Women are regularly ordained as ministers in the UCC. In fact, most seminarians in our denomination are women. And part of that has something to do with the care-giving role of a minister, which our culture associates with women. One of the key skills of a minister is the ability to listen. And speaking for myself, it's an acquired skill for many men, and it sometimes comes more easily for women. (One of the aphorisms I remember from a pastoral psychology class is “If your lips are moving, you aren't listening.”) Obviously, there is a lot more to being a minister than care-giving. Spiritual acuity, the ability to think theologically, motivate volunteers, and lead are all skills one needs. (As well as figuring out how to work the snow blower 15 minutes before a wedding rehearsal.)

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 14.33–35

<sup>5</sup> Karin King, *From Jesus to Christ*,

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/women.html>

In our society, women frequently fill care-giving roles. And it is no coincidence that many of these positions – and ministry positions – pay considerably less than similar positions in the business world and other professions.

Ordained ministry needs women and men who can be caregivers, visionaries, and leaders for the church today and into the future. (Even though Martha served, we should remember the example of Jesus himself, who “took on the form of a slave,”<sup>6</sup> according to Paul’s letter to the church in Phillipi. So, guys can serve, too.) As many of you have heard me said before, the Latin word *minister* means *servant*. The church needs the best and brightest as its ordained leaders, and frankly, we don’t always get them. While the financial rewards are not often huge, there are a lot of other less-tangible benefits to being direct successors in the ministry established by Jesus.

Having seen 250 UCC congregations in Connecticut and knowing colleagues here in the Rocky Mountain Conference, I say this with some perspective: You have no idea how lucky we are to have two incredibly gifted women in professional ministry here at Plymouth in the persons of Sharon and Julie. In their intellect, in their sensitivity, in the desire to serve the church, in their sense of humor, in their deep sense of the Spirit working in the world, these two women are the kind of ordained leaders the church needs.

The United Methodists don’t know what an incredible minister they lost when Sharon came to the UCC; you see they won’t ordain openly gay and lesbian ministers. And the Churches of Christ and the Southern Baptist Convention don’t know what an incredible minister they lost when Julie came to the UCC; neither is willing to ordain women. (I hope it’s alright to gloat just a little bit at their loss and our gain.)

We are far from perfect, but thank God that we in the UCC at least have the good sense to welcome talented women when we find them! I give thanks to God for their ministries, and I give thanks to God for all women and men who have discerned a call to ordained ministry.

We all have a way to engage in ministry, whether we are lay or ordained, whether we work in the home or around the world, whether we are managers or laborers, whether we are retired or still in school. The kingdom of God needs us all. And on this day, when we will ordain Julie Ann Mavity Maddalena, I give special thanks to God for women and men who have answered God’s call to ordained ministry.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2.7