

SERMON - Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints - Thich Nhat Hahn

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 18:1-10a

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on— since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

Luke 10:38-42

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."

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“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things....” Some days, I could probably substitute my name for Martha. I bet I could also substitute the names of other people in this congregation for Martha.

Jesus says so much in those words to Martha and, perhaps, to us.

Jesus is in the home of his friends, Martha and Mary; Lazarus’ sisters. Luke tells us that Mary is sitting with him, listening to him. I picture Jesus sitting in a chair with Mary sitting at his feet. She is calmly and quietly looking up at him, listening, taking in his every word, soaking up time with Jesus. I picture Martha rushing around, in the kitchen preparing the meal, very stressed.

The lectionary put the readings from Luke and Genesis together. In the reading from Genesis, Sara is in the kitchen. Abraham entertains the guests. He tells Sara to prepare the food. So, she made food for their visitors. That’s how it was supposed to be, women were supposed to be in the kitchen. We don’t hear that Sara is able to be present or visit with their guests. Rather she stands in the doorway of the tent and listens.

But in the reading from Luke, Mary was sitting with Jesus. She had not been relegated to the kitchen. Jesus is upsetting the tradition, as he often does when he engages with women. Mary was Jesus’ disciple and friend. He gave her permission be there with him. Even when Martha wanted Jesus to tell Mary to help her, Jesus refused. Instead, he told Martha that Mary had made the better choice. It was a better choice to be with him than to be doing whatever Martha was doing.

Now, we might naturally assume that Martha wants Mary to help her in the kitchen. I once did. But Martha never actually asks for help preparing a meal. Luke tells us Martha is “distracted by her many tasks.” Jesus says she is “worried and distracted by many things.” And if we read Luke’s gospel carefully, there is no mention of a meal. So maybe this is about more than women in the kitchen and preparing meals. Maybe this is about everyday tasks, worry, and sitting with Jesus. Maybe Martha is a lot like us. Maybe she feels overwhelmed with all her responsibilities.

We can feel overwhelmed, pulled in a hundred different directions as parents, grandparents, and even children with all the responsibilities we carry. Maybe the bills are piling up. Maybe the demands placed on us— either from work or family members - seem endless. Maybe a son or daughter is going off to college which can be exciting, challenging and worrisome all at the same time. Or maybe we volunteer and are asked to do more because other volunteers have stopped coming. It can feel overwhelming. But rather than stopping to say “Jesus, I am overwhelmed, I need your help” and **then** take the time to be quiet with Jesus and listen, we keep trying to balance everything. We think we can do it all ourselves. And we can’t.

Jesus is telling Martha that Mary has chosen the better way by sitting with him. Mary is listening and spending time with Jesus, being present to him. And Jesus is inviting Martha to join them – to spend time with him. Perhaps Jesus wants Mary and Martha to be present to him as a friend. Perhaps he wants them to be present to him as disciples because he has much to teach them. Perhaps he just wants them to be present with him. Jesus understands the power of being present. Presence is very powerful.

Yet, this story can seem contradictory to Jesus’ teachings. Jesus sends his disciples out into the world, to do his work. He tells them to heal the sick, cast out demons, feed our neighbors, and follow his example.

But when Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better way, he is also telling Martha to follow his example. After all, Jesus frequently went off to pray, to be present with God. Jesus knew that was important. That does not mean we should permanently withdraw from the world and only focus on God. Rather being present to God, in quiet or in prayer, strengthens us to live our faith and the love of Jesus.

Thich Nhat Hahn, the person whose life we are exploring from the book, “Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints,” * is Buddhist. But we can learn from him; from his life and teaching about meditation and being in the world. Thich Nhat Hahn was born in Vietnam and entered a Buddhist monastery in 1942 at age 16 – having convinced his parents that he wanted to study Buddhism and become a monk. You see, when he was only 8 years old, he had seen a picture of the Buddha sitting on the ground – smiling and looking serene. The young boy

knew then, “I want to know that kind of joy and peace.” But, while he joined the Monastery, he did not live there to become isolated from the world.

As a young monk, he studied more than the teachings of the Buddha, which acknowledges that everyone suffers and experiences hardships, that happiness which comes from possessions does not last, and that when we understand that life is difficult and when we can detach ourselves from things we free ourselves from being dependent on situations or things. Thich Nhat Hahn also studied literature, psychology, science, philosophy, and languages; learning to speak seven languages.

In the 1960’s, with war waging in Vietnam, Thich Naht Hahn became a teacher and developed what he called, “engaged Buddhism.” It included the practice of meditation – centering oneself in the present with an awareness of what is around us and within us, including our feelings. It calls one to notice one’s feelings and thoughts, without judging them, and focusing on our breathing. As we breathe and focus on breathing in and out, we fill ourselves with love or light as we inhale and release it to the world when we exhale. With “engaged Buddhism,” the Buddhist ideals of inner peace and contentment were not meant to be confined to a personal way of life. He wanted to apply Buddhist principles to the suffering that exists in the world. “We want to offer a new kind of Buddhism – a Buddhism that could act as a raft, to save the whole country from the desperate situation of conflict, division and war.”

Nhat Hahn founded an organization, *Interbeing*, with other like-minded monks and nuns. They refused to take sides in the Vietnam war, rather they tended to all who were suffering due to the war, persons on both sides. They published a magazine and promoted non-violence – as an end to war and a vehicle to promote social change. Nhat Hahn was an activist.

As an activist, Nhat Hahn was invited to speak in the United States, where he hoped to appeal directly to the American public. He met with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. They both wanted peace and equality, despite living across the globe from each other. King even nominated Nhat Hahn for the Nobel Peace Prize.

While he was in the United States, the Vietnamese government refused to allow Thich Nhat Hahn to return home. He was Exiled. The French government allowed him to live in France with the freedoms and rights it afforded to its citizens.

There, he built a Buddhist temple and continued to work for peace, even representing Vietnam at the Paris Peace Talks.

After the war, he continued to support the hundreds of thousands Vietnamese “boat people,” refugees who were forced to flee their homeland because they were in danger for not having backed the winning party during the war. He worked with others to help these people; rescuing them, getting them food, water, and medical supplies; and working with other countries, including the US, to accept them as refugees.

All the while, Nhat Hahn continued to live in the monastery; where monks, nuns, and students together did chores to keep their community running. He continued to teach others. He practiced and taught mindfulness, focusing on what one is doing in the present moment. He also taught and lived the Buddhist principle of compassion, believing that small acts of compassion prepare and strengthen us to perform greater and greater acts of compassion.

In 2018, Thich Nhat Hahn was finally allowed to return to Vietnam.

Roman Catholic, Franciscan priest and author who some consider a present day mystic, Richard Rohr, founded the Center for Action and Contemplation. I once attended one of his retreats where he was asked what word was most important in that title, Center for Action and Contemplation. His response was “and.” He explained that action is a necessary aspect of living one’s faith but that without contemplation, we will run out of the energy needed to serve others. So we need both.

Jesus invited Martha to sit with him, to step away from her busyness. To take time. To be present. To listen. Jesus invites us too.

Jesus himself went off to pray, to be quiet and be present to his Father which empowered him to live a life of compassion and love in which he was aware of the sufferings of others and tended to them. Time with our God empowers us too.

Meditation – quieting ourselves. Mindfulness-being aware and living in the present moment. Compassion-caring for another. Awareness – recognizing the suffering in our world. These were essential teachings of Buddhism shared by

Thich Nhat Hahn, who used them to serve others. You can say that these same teaching were also common to the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus invites us to come to him. To pause, to be present and to listen; to know God's love and to let the Spirit guide us. Through meditation or prayer, we can be filled with awareness, compassion, and the love of Jesus. Then we can share these with others. Quiet time with Jesus can give us peace, strength, and hope. We need peace, strength and hope; and we need them to bring compassion and love to our world.

* Akers, Daneen. Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints. "Thich Nhat Hahn" (U.S.: Watchfire Media, 2019.)