

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Agency is Complicated

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here is one of the most important pieces of advice I offer to couples when doing premarital counseling with them: try not to approach conflict as one of you versus the other; rather, try to approach conflict with an attitude of us versus the problem (whatever that might really be, and much work can be required to determine the **real** issue). One of the reasons this is such an important piece of advice is because it acknowledges each person's agency and directs that agency in the most effective manner, at the problem.

Now, why is agency so important? It is a gift from God that allows us all manner of freedom in how we relate to each other, God, and Creation. And when we're not cognizant of our own agency, things often go sideways, which is exactly what is occurring in our Gospel text today.

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me."¹ This statement is an excellent example of not recognizing people's agency. Martha can't recognize Mary's agency, Jesus' agency, she doesn't even recognize **her own** agency amid the stress of hosting duties. And what does this lead to? Well, if Martha has her way it will lead to Martha versus Mary, the bout in the 'burbs.²

¹ Luke 10:40b (NRSVUE)

² Mary and Martha lived in a village just outside of Jerusalem.

I'll be honest, I can resonate with Martha's complaint in our text today. It can be very frustrating to feel as though you are the only one who cares about, in this case, the comfort of your guests. And I have echoed Martha's words in my head more than once, "Get off your butt and help me!" And when I act out of that frustration, disregarding the agency of the people involved, it rarely turns out well for me. Can any of you resonate with this experience?

Jesus, in response to Martha's anger and frustration tries to direct her attention to Mary's agency, and through that remind her of her own. Listen again to what Jesus says to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed--indeed only one. Mary has **chosen** the better part, which will not be taken away from her"³ (emphasis mine).

The other piece of his response that I wish we had a better sense of, is Jesus' tone as he responds. Is it chastising? Condescending? Judgmental? Well, none of those attitudes are particularly consistent with how Jesus acts elsewhere. So I begin to wonder...especially given how his response begins, "Marth, Martha." I wonder if Jesus recognizes a panic attack when he sees one as Martha grapples with pressure and anxiety. I wonder if his tone was the calm, straightforward tone that is recommended when someone is going through a panic attack. Martha, Martha, hear me, slow down and recognize your agency in the midst of this!

Why does Martha feel such pressure to perform as generous hostess? Where is that pressure coming from? I am sure most, if not all, of the women present here today can answer that pretty easily...expectation. Societal, cultural, and personal expectations. All these pressures that seek to rob us of our agency, to keep us afraid, hungry, and mean.

³ Luke 10:41b-42 (NRSVUE)

And to defy those expectations can be costly! At a minimum it would likely cause a loss of respect and esteem from your peers; and at worse it could mean harsh punishment over even banishment by those in authority over you (and as a woman, most men in her life were in authority over Martha). It's no wonder Martha is desperate for help!

But Jesus seems unconcerned with societal expectations such as gender roles. Rather, Jesus consistently met people, even women, where they were at and accepted them for who they were. On top of that, he regularly subverted societal norms, roles, and expectations: centering children, speaking with women, touching lepers, ignoring purity laws, and speaking out on behalf of those society's expectations were crushing.

Remember, Jesus has made his mission abundantly clear by this time in Luke's Gospel. He is entirely oriented towards bringing the Kingdom of God. And the way in which he describes that kingdom speaks of liberation and justice, not expectations and roles. The Kingdom of God, as Jesus teaches, is a kingdom where we can be who God made us to be; one where every person has agency, dignity, and worth.

Martha needs to be reminded that this isn't her versus Mary, it's really Martha and Mary versus a patriarchal society that places unwelcome and undue expectations on women (and children). Now, that's not a fight they can meaningfully engage in, but perhaps they can be a little counter cultural. Perhaps, at least in the presence of Jesus, they can fight the patriarchy a little...exercise their agency...at least a little.

It makes me wonder about the "better part" Jesus speaks of. Is that just choosing to passively listen at the feet of Jesus? No, I don't think so. I have come to believe that the better part Jesus is alluding to is that Mary exercised her agency (she chose!) and did what she felt called to do in that moment: learn at the feet of Jesus. Martha lost her agency to the pressures and

expectations being applied to her, and understandably so. But the result was the same: she was hosting not because she wanted to, but because she was expected to. And out of her frustration she tries to take Jesus' agency away too, cajoling him (don't you care?!?!) to order Mary to help. By attempting to take others' agency away Martha is participating in the work of oppression herself, an ironic reality of most abusive systems of power (getting victims to perpetuate the systems oppressing them).

God has made us to live in righteous ways, ways that are loving and lead to *shalom*. This is not possible without both autonomy and agency since God does not force us to live in the healthy ways we were created for. And this is, in part, because God wants us to be free...more than free...liberated.

God wants us to be completely free, liberated, from pressures and expectations, commands, and judgements. AND OUT OF THAT FREEDOM God invites us to naturally love, honor, and respect one another, God, and creation. And we cannot do any of that without recognizing our own agency and autonomy as well as recognizing the agency and autonomy of our neighbors too. Once recognized, we can exercise our agency on behalf of God's Kingdom: to speak out against the forces that rob people of agency or deny their autonomy; to question the expectations and roles placed on others; to stand in solidarity with those in fear; and to create spaces where people can be heard, welcomed, and accepted for who they are. Amen.