
Paying Attention to Sin

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie Nagley on July 17, 2016 at St. Luke's, Bethesda, Maryland

...if God were to wave a magic wand and make it all better, how would we be better?

We don't talk about sin much in this church. Maybe we should. The problem in bringing up the topic of sin is that most of us stop listening because most of us beat ourselves up enough on a daily, hourly basis that we just don't need to hear more about shortcomings. It might help to realize that sin isn't so much the things we do that we ought not to do but a state of mind.

The definition of sin is separation from God. We are sinful when we distance ourselves from the love and grace of God. In that separation we do things we ought not do and leave undone those things we should have done.

My favorite take on sin is that we separate ourselves from God when we refuse to be conscious. That is, when we refuse to see what's going on inside of us that is sin. When we refuse to see what is going on around us that is sin.

The greatest sin of the everyday Christian is the failure to pay attention, to see, to see where we have fallen short of God's high opinion of us, to pay attention to what is really important and to pay attention to the presence of God.

The story of Martha and Mary is full of the sins that come up when someone refuses to be conscious. It's also one of those handful of stories that Christian love to hate especially women.

We hate it because so often we feel put upon to tend to all the small and time consuming chores of everyday living that need to be done, while someone and historically that been some white guy – gets to go out into the world and get a lot praise for doing greater things.

We hate this story because we feel maligned by Jesus who seems to prize Mary's idleness while our Martha hands get chapped by doing the dishes and kneading the bread. We hate this story because while Mary gets to listen to new ideas and dream new dreams we're stuck in the kitchen doing the same old thing so that others can dream new dreams and romp with new ideas.

Before you know it we are seething with resentment as we plunge our hands deeper into the sink. Before you know it we are mad as hell feeling overlooked and neglected.

Before you know it we are churning with anger because for all the work we done we aren't prized. We've hustled for our worthiness and come up short, yet again. And you know what? It's Jesus fault. We look out into the living room and there he is with Mary just having the best time. What a jerk!

You've to got to give Martha credit. At least she sticks her neck out and complains. She doesn't just stay in the kitchen and mope. She speaks up:

Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Jesus answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

What is happening right in front of Martha, as she seethes with anger, is Jesus turning the world upside down and countering the culture's bias against women.

Jesus is taking Mary into the circle and making Mary a disciple. Martha can't see that because she is so worried that what she's doing isn't valued. Because she is comparing herself with Mary she doesn't value what she is bringing to the table. Martha's willingness to do the work of hospitality is making this moment possible. Martha's willingness to peel the potatoes and set the table and serve the meal is making it possible for Jesus to come into the living room.

Martha doesn't appreciate her role in the greater scheme of things because she's comparing her value to Mary's. Comparison eats at her soul and clouds her vision. Comparison is the thief of happiness and has the illustrious role of making us blind to the possibilities right in front of us.

This is a story that bugs many of us because we're immediately caught in the sin of comparison. Our heads go to who is better, Mary or Martha? To favor Mary must mean service is the lesser. To favor Martha, means that learning and praying and thinking deeply isn't as important. Of course, we know better. Learning and growing in faith and serving in faith are all one package of what it means to give your heart and mind and soul to God.

The story of Martha and Mary follows the story of the Good Samaritan and the man asking Jesus what he needs to do to inherit the kingdom of God. In both of those stories the big sin of ordinary people is not paying attention. The man asking about his inheritance was so busy trying to do the right thing to be rewarded he wasn't paying attention. The Levite and the Priest were so busy earning their righteousness by doing what they thought they were supposed to do that they weren't paying attention and didn't practice what they said they believed in. But even that falls short of seeing what these stories are really about. They aren't really about Martha or Mary or the rich man or the Good Samaritan, the Levite and the Priest. What they are about is God, what God wants for us in this world, what God wants to make possible through us and with us.

We've lived through some tough weeks during this summer that's just half gone. And we've lived through tough weeks before that. I have no doubt we will live through tough weeks in the months to come. The world is harsh. The world is often brutal.

The question that gets all the time is where is God in all of that? Where is God in the terror in Nice? Where is God in the streets of Turkey? Where is God in the killings of police and black men?

The answer remains the same. God is there weeping over the bodies. God is there watching the fallout of insidious racism and holding black babies who don't have enough food, and trying to stop the bleeding of black men and boys and girls dying of gun violence. God is present as a truck viciously mows down a crowd in France because God is holding the mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers grieving.

But we want more of God. I want more of God. I want a God that stops the bleeding and stops trucks. I want a God who disarms bombs and the ear piercing sound of automatic weapons.

We want a God who takes away the cruelty and the heart break. But if God were to wave a magic wand and make it all better, how would we be better? What would we have learned and how would we have grown as God's people?

The horrible brutality of the present day is calling us like the man beaten and left for dead at the side of the road who the Levite and the Priest passed by and who was saved by the Samaritan, the one who all the others thought was outside God's grace and love, to be the presence of grace and love. The brutality of the present day is calling us like Jesus called to the rich man to give our whole attention to God. The brutality of the present day is begging us to both to deep reflection on what it means to follow Jesus and to practice what we say we believe in the way we live and move and have our being as Jesus did on that day with Martha and Mary.

Where is God in the brutality and heartbreak of the world? I think God is caressing the bloody and the broken crying for us to do something for the sake of love.

This past Thursday as some of us went to the Big Train Baseball game others of us stood on the West Wing of the Capitol pleading for sensible gun laws and an end to gun violence. Both of those things are ways we show up for love. Last night 50 or so of us laughed and ate and listened to Justine Miller and Friends play terrific jazz. That is one of the ways we show up for love. We refuse to hide. We refuse to shut ourselves off from joy. We refuse to give and we refuse to relinquish our responsibility in making this community, this world a more gracious and God filled place.

We don't have to do grand things. What we do starts right here, right now. It starts with waking up and seeing each other and listening to each other, and letting go of our need to compare who is better or what is better. It begins with letting go the resentments that steal our joy. It begins with valuing who we are, each of us equal or worthy in the eyes of God, and realizing that those we meet are just as prized and equal and worthy as we are. It begins by those of us who have white privilege to realize what that means and what that privilege has done and is doing to our brothers and sisters of color.

This is what essayist Fran Lebowitz said recently about white privilege:

“The way to approach it, I think, is not to ask, ‘What would it be like to be black?’ ... but to seriously consider what it is like to be white. And what it is like to be white is not to say, ‘We have to level the playing field,’ but to acknowledge that not only do white people own the playing field but they have so designated this plot of land as a playing field to begin with. White people are the playing field. The advantage of being white is so extreme, so overwhelming, so immense, that to use the word ‘advantage’ at all is misleading since it implies a kind of parity that simply does not exist.

[To be white is to own the playing field]. The owners. The people in charge. That’s the advantage of being white. And that’s the game. So by the time the white person sees the black person standing next to him at what he thinks is the starting line, the black person should be exhausted from his long and arduous trek to the beginning.”

There are so many ways that we can participate in making the world better and it starts with paying attention.

We have it in us to change the energy of hate into love. God’s dream may take a while to realize but we will get there. It will take hard and holy work. It will take self-examination and the painful realization the ways we’ve fallen short of God’s hope for us. It will take hospitality to new ideas and change. It will take peeling the potatoes and learning what it means to be a follower of Jesus, but we can do this.

We may not see the results of this holy work in our time but if we do our part now the better will be there for our children and our children’s children. We have it in us and a very patience God is waiting.

