

“Who is Coming to Dinner?”
Luke 10:38-42

In 1967 the movie “Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner” was released. It was a groundbreaking movie in its presentation of a difficult social issue in our American culture. The story of the movie is about a young White American woman as she brings her fiancé, an African American man, to her liberal upper class American parents’ home in San Francisco. Even though the parents are supposedly liberal, they were shocked when their daughter brought this man home who is of a different race. This was a very sensitive topic at the time because interracial marriage was still illegal in 17 Southern states until the summer of the year of the release of that movie. Imagine the shock of the parents and the shock of the audience of people who watched this movie at that turning point in our race relations as a nation!

This was in a way the same shock that Jesus produced when he sat at table with a woman, Mary, reclining at his feet. The story of Mary in Martha from the Gospel of Luke is often limited to the importance of work and contemplation as a balance in our lives. What we often miss because of distance in time and culture is the radical nature of that whole encounter between Jesus and Mary. In that culture and at that time women simply did not sit at table with men. Men always reclined at an ancient meal, as we see in many other stories in the Gospels. Respectable women were not present at a reclining banquet, and if they were, they were to sit and not recline. But here in our story we find Mary reclining with Jesus at the table. This story turned the gender roles of the day upside down. Now if you remember from two weeks ago, the story right before this one is that of the “Good” Samaritan. This was another shocking story about how Jesus taught about loving the enemy, not just the stranger. So this story continues the same line of thinking addressing another social problem that the people had, namely sexism.

Jesus was demonstrating to his followers that all are called to be his followers, both men and women. It is a story that shows us that Mary was functioning as a disciple by sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his teachings. This is what the male disciples did, but this is also what Mary did. After the resurrection the early Church struggled with the role of women in it. Yet, women played a key role in running and hosting churches until the Church lost its strong connection to the radical nature of the gospel.

Gender roles are often assigned based on the culture. Part of our work for the kingdom of God is to create communities that can allow people the freedom to be who they want to be instead of being forced into a role based on their gender, age, race, or class. Our wholeness is dependent on this kind of freedom, the freedom to be and the freedom to do. At the end of the day we need to be able to be free from our roles. This is not because our roles are bad. It is because we are bigger than any role we can have. This is as important for us today as it was in the days of Jesus. Even though sexism is not as strong as it was in the time and culture of Jesus, the social expectations that we have to deal with limit our ability to find wholeness and freedom.

In his book, *A New Earth*, Eckhart Tolle says, "What really matters is not what function you fulfill in this world, but whether you identify with your function to such an extent that it takes you over and becomes a role that you play. When you play roles you are unconscious. When you catch yourself playing a role, that recognition creates a space between you and the role. When you are completely identified with a role, you confuse a pattern of behavior with who you are, and you take yourself very seriously. You also automatically assign roles to others that correspond

to yours." What Tolle is inviting us to see is that our souls are larger than the roles we play in life. Our roles in life may change but who we are as children of God is not dependent on those roles. Think about a time in your life when your role changed suddenly or gradually. How did you deal with it? How are you dealing with it? For some of us this may mean that we recently lost a loved one and our role as caregiver has stopped. For others this may mean that we lost our employment and our role as provider for the household has changed. How can we find wholeness even as our roles shift and change? How can we go beyond the cultural limits of male and female roles?

I believe our wholeness depends heavily on our alignment with the Spirit of God. Mary in our Gospel story knew and chose the better part for her. She knew deep within her soul that she was called to be a disciple. That is why she was able to go beyond the cultural limitations that were put on women in those days.

For us today as we think of gender roles, the greatest challenge is embracing the fullness of who we are. This is true for both men and women. In order to embrace our wholeness and go beyond the social norms that restrict us, we need to embrace both the masculine and feminine within ourselves. Our cultural norms tend to send girls and women negative messages about their self image. For example, girls in our society are often driven through media images to worry about their weight. As psychologist Mary Pipher puts it, they are driven to worship the "god of thinness." Boys and men on the other hand have their cultural codes to follow from being tough to being only fixers and thinkers. In his book, *From Wild Man to Wise Man*, Richard Rohr talks about the impact of the restrictions of gender roles on male spirituality. While women are expected to express their feelings and inner concerns, men are expected to focus outward, to be strong and pretend not to be affected by inner dis-ease. This loss of their inner self makes their spirituality weak and fragile. Rohr says, "A man without his feminine soul .. will move toward the outer world of things and his head will be his control tower. He will build, explain, use, fix, manipulate, legislate, order and play with whatever he bothers to touch, but he will not really touch it at all - for he does not know the inside of things. He has no subtlety, imagination, ability to harmonize or live with paradox or mystery. He engineers reality instead of living it. He is afraid of real life... And that is why the control tower of reason and pseudo control work overtime. It is the only way he can give himself a sense of security and significance. He is trapped in part of the picture which is dangerous precisely because he thinks it is the whole picture." The same is true of women who live unbalanced by their masculine soul. They tend to become too inward, "preoccupied with relationships, a morass of unclarified feelings and religion itself as a security blanket." According to Rohr, most of us suffer an imbalance in our spirituality, overly outward and practical or overly inward and emotional.

The invitation of the Gospel of Luke today is for us to embrace the fullness of who we are and to allow the Spirit of God to transform and liberate us from all that dominates and controls us. This is not to say that men and women are not different or to say that we don't need roles in our society. What this means is that we are always freed from having our roles dominate and define who we are, ultimately. Living in the kingdom of God is an invitation for each of us to live to our fullest potential in service and love. Success does not become our god, whatever way that success may be defined for each of us. In his book, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering*, Richard Rohr notes that, "Because we are so afraid of nonsuccess, of being a refugee, not having a home, afraid of the opposite masculine or feminine parts of our own souls, we marginalize whoever represents those parts of our soul that we deny. We hate in them what we are afraid to admit in ourselves. We keep ourselves at a distance from handicapped people because every one of us fears our own handicaps. We separate ourselves from retarded people. They're a

threat to our supposedly rational world. We surround ourselves, unfortunately, with clones of ourselves."

The story of Mary and Martha is a strong reminder for us to move into the fullness of our being as children of God. Our social status, our social and gender roles, our ideas of success, our struggles with self-image, and even our racial identity can become barriers for us to enjoy living in and working for the kingdom of God in our world. How does Christ help liberate us from those restrictions? What radical acts of grace do we need in our lives to see beyond these limits?

Once, the great Hassidic rabbi, Zusia, came to his followers. His eyes were red with tears, and his face was pale with fear. "Zusia, what's the matter? You look frightened!" "The other day, I had a vision. In it, I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life." The followers were puzzled. "Zusia, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?" Zusia turned his gaze to heaven. "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'" His followers persisted. "So, what will they ask you?" "And I have learned," Zusia sighed, "that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'" One of his followers approached Zusia and placed his hands on Zusia's shoulders. Looking him in the eyes, the follower demanded, "But what will they ask you?" "They will say to me, 'Zusia, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.'" They will say, "Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?"

May we be blessed by the power of the Holy Spirit to embrace all that we are and all that others are! Amen.