

Christ Collides with Our Bias

2025 03 09 Toronto United Mennonite Church

Lent I

[Luke 10:25-42](#) - Parable of the Good Samaritan, Mary and Martha.

Imagine Martha had said nothing. We would have learned nothing. Imagine Mary had helped her quietly. We would have learned nothing. 'Well behaved women seldom make history' - Laurel Thatcher Ulrich originally intended it to refer to the process of writing history and thinking historically -not just being remembered by historians, but being historians themselves.

On its surface the story seems to be about two women who are, in various ways, behaving badly, according to social norms. Mary isn't helping out with household tasks. Martha isn't keeping quiet about it. Both women have been celebrated for claiming time, space, and attention. I think we can actually say that both Martha and Mary are women who make history because they behave well. Courageously. Thoughtfully. Righteously.

If you had asked me a week ago what Martha was doing, I would have said she was in the kitchen, making food. I wonder if any of you also pictured that. Be thankful that I can't look you in the eye and ask - because food is not mentioned anywhere in the passage. There is no kitchen in the text. But Martha is busy 'doing all that had to be done'. So what is that?

Elsewhere in the Bible we hear that Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus live in Bethany, which is on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem. Based on a number of clues, scholars have suggested that Bethany may have been a place of sanctuary for the sick and impoverished, and especially for people suffering leprosy. How does the story change if we see Jesus and his disciples visiting the workers in a food bank? Or a hospice for the sick and dying?

[Summary of the research on Bethany:

https://www.liquisearch.com/bethany_biblical_village/bethany_and_care_of_the_poor_and_sick]

Remember that Bethany is outside of Jerusalem. You got there instead of Jerusalem. What if it is not a suburb but a sanatorium? It is where Jesus chooses to stay before and after his visits to the Temple in Jerusalem. While his disciples admire the huge temple buildings, Jesus sees the ways that the poor are charged to enter the sacred places. And he turns around and leads them all back to Bethany rather than stay in the place of exclusion and division. The next morning he comes and overturns tables.

The verb used for Martha's activity is *Diakonea*. In Greek literature this word could mean many things - waiting tables, organizing a community, creating and distributing of food, of being an ambassador or emissary, a mediator, or a crisis worker meeting vital needs in a time of chaos or conflict.

Within the text of the Gospels this word is only ever used of the work that women do, and the work that Jesus does. It is an implicitly gendered word, and a word where Jesus and the early church transcends gender.

Mary and Martha were well behaved women who made history. Behaving well meant advocating for the needs of the people, for the sharing of labour, and for the right to be equal with Jesus and his male followers. Behaving well means breaking bias.

Christ collides with our bias. Our theme throughout Lent is 'Christ Collides'. As human beings, we establish routines, patterns, hierarchies and walls. These things help us feel safe and in control. But Christ comes in like a wrecking ball. Christ collides with the wisdom and ways of this world.

According to the good news recorded in the Bible, the life of Jesus is a series of collisions between Jesus and the ideologies and interests that limit human life. The

earliest Christians believed that these stories of collision were important to remember. They remembered the stories that Jesus told. The parable form that he used for his teachings often uses unexpected images or outcomes. These stories have become familiar over the centuries, but even today there is the possibility to be shocked, upset, or burst out laughing. The parable's power comes from the way it breaks the expectation of the listener - just like a good joke. It relies on you having a bias, and then subverting that bias to help you see something greater.

Christ collides with our bias, and in the moment where bias fractures, there is the chance to see a deeper truth. None of these stories destroy racism or sexism. What they do is introduce a moment of recognition.

Jesus tells the story we call the Good Samaritan because he is questioned by someone about something we might consider one of the first order questions - "what must I do to have eternal life?"

You know the story: you've told it already today, I won't repeat it all. The next question is 'who is my neighbour'. For those approaching Jesus, the quest for eternal life becomes a quest to know 'who is my neighbour'. Who do I need to love?

You likely already know that the big twist in the story, the subversion of expectations, is that the Samaritan is the good guy. To Jews like Jesus and his community, the Samaritans are enemies. In many ways they are worse than the Romans. The Samaritans are not foreigners who have strange customs, they are neighbours, who live right next door, they have similar history, similar beliefs, but they are wrong. They can't be talked out of it, you can't excuse it on the basis that they don't know any better. You just can't talk to them, and you need to cut them out of your life.

Perhaps you can think of another situation where people share the same geography and history, but hold very different, even opposing views. These views make it impossible to relate well to each other, even to the point of open hostility.

Peter Haresnape

You know who I am thinking about. Two parallel cultures, side by side, each claiming to have the truth. I'm talking about the Mennonite Brethren. *Anathema!*

My professor of Mennonite history pointed out that Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren have the hardest time talking to each other. Mennonites love to be in ecumenical dialogue with Catholics and Lutherans, who historically persecuted our ancestors in the faith. There's nothing more wonderful than making friends with a repentant oppressor. We love to honour our Jewish and Muslim neighbours and support them in statements and ceremonies.

But don't ask us to talk to the Mennonite Brethren. Not because they are different, but because they are the same. The MBs have such a similar history to the Mennonite Church, and so many values in common, but they have different conclusions and a different style. With them, we don't get to feel like a historical victim. We'll talk to the MBs, but only when they come and join our conferences and congregations.

Of course this is an exaggeration, and I know it's going to sound weird to different people for different reasons, but when Christ collides with our bias, when we have a moment of freedom from the grip of self-righteous certainty, we have to be honest.

I'm grieved to the core that people who claim the name 'Christian' are doing harm in this world. And here I am not talking about the Mennonite Brethren. I want them to be defeated, but the teachings of Jesus instead collide with my own biases, and the temptation to believe that these people are utterly depraved, a basket of deplorables, and that their cruelty and cowardice makes them unworthy of respect and love.

But if Jesus has the power to shatter the biases that I hold, can we also pray that the biases of our enemies about us will be broken? Can we hold out hope for their transformation - not as a punishment from God, but as a shared experience of rehumanisation? This is hard, because it doesn't really rely on our efforts. Like Martha,

we can't make it happen by being worried and overworked. We have to sit down, with trust, and listen to some stories.

We confess that the chosen one of God did not do his business with weapons and armies, or tariffs and threats, or appeals to national pride. He told stories, and he talked about a kingdom beyond the powers of this world. In his stories the clear boundaries and distinctions are reversed. Impoverished people are exalted over those who have plundered them. Impure substances like yeast and weeds become symbols of vitality and transformation. Despised neighbours show themselves to be vulnerable humans who act in mercy.

We have a God who tells stories. We are the story that God is telling - and we are not the only characters. I look forward to hearing your stories, especially as we meet to pray throughout Lent, listening together for something surprising in the old stories. Maybe by behaving badly, or behaving well, we will tell a story that challenges bias and offers a surprising conclusion. That would be following in the example of Jesus.

May it be so. Amen.