Sermon: Tuesday, October 5, 2010, Seminary Chapel

Galatians 1: 13-24
Psalm 139:1-14
Luke 10: 38-42

As Luke tells it, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he stops in a village where two sisters live: Mary and Martha. Martha is hospitable but Mary is a bit odd: She acts like one of the disciples. She sits at Jesus’ feet. Rather odd for a woman in the ancient world of this era. Quickly Martha is tired of doing all the work while Mary eats up Jesus’ every word. In Tintoretto’s 16th century painting of Mary and Martha with Jesus, Martha is in black and she is pointing at Mary. I can hear her saying: “Hey, Sis, I need a little help in the kitchen!” Mary is in an exquisite pumpkin colored gown and she seems unaware of Martha. She is fixated on Jesus.

But Martha actually says nothing to Mary. Now this is when we need Jacques Hadler’s Family Systems expertise! Martha goes straight to Jesus and urges him to tell Mary to get to work. “Lord, don’t you care?” “Don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”

In a seventeenth century painting by Vermeer, Mary is not elegantly clad. She is without shoes at Jesus’ feet, clued to his every word. Martha approaches the two with a basket of bread. Martha points at Mary in the Tintoretto painting but with Vermeer Jesus is pointing at Mary—as if to say: “This is the example I am looking for.” So, for those who wear the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets: Is this what Jesus would do? Jesus criticizes Martha who is doing, and he praises Mary who is being. You know, this is one time I do not believe that Jesus got it right. Martha is sweating away preparing a meal and offering hospitality. Mary is pensive and thoughtful—sitting at the master’s feet. In Luke’s Gospel women are not silent and passive—they are powerful, of means, articulate and worthy. But give me a break: Who is supposed to fix lunch? In both Tintoretto and Vermeer there are men hovering in the wings—doing nothing. What was Jesus thinking? Give me some Marthas any day! I’d like some male Marthas and some female Marthas!

In the first years of the nineteenth century William Blake painted a lovely watercolor which can be seen in the Victoria and Albert in London. In it Mary sits with her eyes on Jesus. Martha holds a serving tray—almost as though it were a weapon. On her face is this look: “Mary, if you do not get up and do something, I am going to bash you with this tray!”

Was there really tension between the sisters over Jesus’ visit? We will never know. Perhaps they were really focused on the amazing moment: that Jesus had come to visit in their home. Yes, I will always be bothered by Jesus’ comment: “Mary has chosen the better part.” Was Jesus saying: “Oh Martha, stop being so busy about your religion—and start being more spiritual like dear Mary?” Who knows what was in Jesus’ mind. Perhaps it was a bad day—although he wears his own lovely gown in the Tintoretto painting!
Let us remember: This was one day in the life of Mary and Martha. If Jesus came to my house, what would I do? Perhaps Mary and Martha are both teaching us to pray that, when Jesus comes to our house, let us give thanks first that he has come to us. God’s hospitality cannot be missed in this lovely human story. God comes to us in Jesus and welcomes us. When the Lord comes, let us sit like Mary at his feet and listen to every word, even that Eternal Word that gives us hope and life eternal. But when the Lord comes, it is never enough to listen. Listening always calls us to act—to serve others, even as Martha served Jesus. Yes, that is the truth of this encounter that has been told in paintings, sermons and stories. Jesus comes to us and we listen and we serve in his name. We join Lazarus’ sisters and all the saints who sit at Jesus’ feet and serve him with all our souls.

JAMES BARNEY HAWKINS IV