

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Living in Ordinary Time: Choosing the Best”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Genesis 1:26-31, Luke 10:38-42

Her name is Homa Hoodfar. My guess is that few of us know who she is. She is the professor emeritus of anthropology at Concordia University in Montreal. She holds dual citizenship of Canada and Iran. Over the years Hoodfar focused most of her work on the democratic rights of women in Islamic societies and how religious symbols and interpretations of those symbols have been used to both support and repress women’s rights. With family in Iran she often traveled back and forth from Canada to Iran for both work and pleasure. This past March, however something unexpected happened. The day before she was supposed to leave to join her family in London, Hoodfar’s computer, passport and her research papers were all confiscated by the Revolutionary Guard. They refused to allow her to leave the country and would regularly bring her in for questioning asking her, “Are you a feminist?” She has now been formally arrested and charged...though no one is sure with what since the indictment is sealed. Since her arrest she has been sitting in the infamous Evin Prison with no access to family, friends or an attorney. The official Iranian media has hinted at the charges by accusing her of fomenting a feminist revolution.

My guess is that to many of us this kind of behavior seems archaic and odd. In the 21st Century it might boggle some of our minds that a person could be arrested for being a feminist. Yet it ought to be a reminder of the power of culture and tradition. As Americans we live in a culture that has been in flux from the moment the first settlers arrived on this continent. We have in fact become a powerful mix of cultures which often clash yet somehow manage to hold together. As a recent Syrian immigrant said, as he travels on the subway to and from work in Boston, it is unfathomable how we as such a diverse nation hold together. That being said, this ability to hold together causes us forget just how powerful tradition and culture can be. In places like Iran, Afghanistan, India and elsewhere the culture and traditions clearly outline the boundaries for men, women and children. To step outside of those boundaries means one runs the risk of punishment by family, society or both. With that in mind then we have the background necessary to understand our story.

Mary and Martha understand clearly what their culture and tradition expected of them. They were Jewish women living in the first century. What this means is that they knew their place. As women they were to cook, clean and watch over the children. They were not to speak to or be around men who were not their relatives. When men come to the home, women were to stay outside unless they were invited in for a particular task, such as serving food or wine. To do otherwise was scandalous and was to invite not simply the anger of their spouse but the condemnation of the community. Only women of ill repute would violate these cultural boundaries. These were the culture and the traditions which guided Martha and Mary as they prepared for the visit of Jesus and the other men of the community. They knew what they had to do. And Martha did it well. She lovingly and carefully fulfilled her end of the societal social contract. Her sister Mary, on the other hand, decided to not only break that contract with tradition and culture but to shred it to pieces.

Mary's actions were scandalous, revolutionary and so completely outside of the norm that it is remarkable that Luke would tell this story. Here's why. First Mary did not fulfill her role as hostess. She should have been helping Martha to cook and serve. Second Mary refused to stay in the background. She placed herself in the presence of men who were not her relatives; in the presence of men who were strangers. Third, she placed herself at the feet of Jesus. What we need to know about this description of her location is that it is about more than simply the geography of the seating arrangement. To sit at the feet of a rabbi is to sit where not only where disciples sit, but where rabbis in training sit. It is the language used by the Apostle Paul when he describes his rabbinic training. He sat at the feet of Gamaliel the rabbi. What this means is that when Martha comes to Jesus says, "Make Mary help me," she is not simply asking for help because she is overwhelmed in the kitchen. She made a plea for Jesus to put Mary in her appropriate place; to right the ship of culture and tradition; and to insure that the house of Mary and Martha will be respected in the village. Yet Jesus refuses to do so and in the process said that Mary had chosen the better way.

It is at this point that people go off in multiple directions trying to explain what Jesus meant by the "better way." Some, who are "Marthas" in this world, want Jesus to send Mary back to the kitchen because they understand what it's like to have to do all of the work by themselves. They understand that there is something wonderful about working hard to show hospitality. Those who advocate for equality between the sexes see this as Jesus advocating for a first century feminism, releasing women from having to always be the perfect hostess and instead inviting them into the religious community as equal partners. Still others see this as simply reminding people that there are different kinds of spirituality. Unfortunately, all of these interpretations miss the key word in the story. And that word is "distracted." In other words, when Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better way, it is that Mary has chosen to be focused on what matters; on the presence of Jesus and the kingdom that he offers. Mary has chosen to risk everything, her reputation, her place in the community and possibly even her life in order to discover this kingdom of love and grace that is unfolding in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus did not criticize Martha for following the traditions of her culture. He criticized her because she was so distracted by them that she could not see what was right in front of her...the messiah who was offering a peace that passes all understanding. What this means is that Martha did not need to quit serving, but that in the process of serving she needed to pay attention to the message that Jesus was bringing.

Being distracted is something to which most of us can relate. We live in a world of distractions: television, computers, tablets, phones, all of which bring us constant stream of entertainment and information. We live in a world of meetings, activities, schedules and obligations, all of which keep us in constant motion. It becomes difficult for many of us to stay focused on any one thing, for any period of time. And thus we run the risk of becoming "Marthas" who miss what Jesus has to offer, not because of custom and tradition but because we are those who are distracted from focusing on Jesus Christ and the lives he calls us to live. We find ourselves not being distracted drivers, but being distracted believers. For many it is hard to focus long enough to pray, to worship, to serve or to sense what God is doing in our lives, church and world. The challenge then becomes for us to intentionally focus our faith through practices such as regular prayer, Sabbath observance or scripture reading. The challenge is to stay focused enough that the love of Christ might be made real within us that it might be made real within the world.

My challenge to all of us this week then is this, to ask ourselves, how am I focusing on my faith such that I am not missing the love that Jesus Christ offers through the kingdom that is unfolding all around me?