

A Woman's Work Is Never Done!
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The dictionary defines "sanctuary" as 1) a holy place set aside for worship and 2) a place of refuge or protection; originally, fugitives from justice were immune from arrest in churches or other sacred places.

I am guessing most of us are familiar with the idea of church as a place for worship and even refuge from the cares of the world. Indeed, one of the most frequently used arguments against churches taking part in the affairs of the outside world is that the church ought to be a spiritual refuge from the affairs of the world. We may not be so familiar with the idea of church as a place of safety for those in trouble with the law. However, the idea that there should be such places is intrinsic to our identity as people of God. As I pointed out in my Voice of Faith letter, Moses was instructed by God to set apart certain cities of refuge, sanctuary cities, for those in need of a safe place (Numbers 35:15). Through-out it's history, the church has provided refuge to people in danger. Christians during the Holocaust were simply enacting their faith when they took in Jews in defiance of Hitler's laws.

God is often described in the Psalms as providing refuge for us: Psalm 91: "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my god in whom I trust.' For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler." (v 1-4)

The author of Hebrews describes Christ as a high priest who gives us a sanctuary "not made with hands". . .eternal in the heavens (Hebrews 9:11).

This idea of sanctuary, then, is a foundational one in our faith whether we are talking about a physical place of sanctuary or the sanctuary of the heart, a spiritual sanctuary.

During our Lenten season I would like to explore the meaning of sanctuary, both physical and spiritual. As you may know by now, Susan Minor and I have been attending meetings at St. Matthews Church. A variety of faith communities, the number of which grows each time we meet, are coming together to think about what it means to provide sanctuary for immigrants who are being rounded up by the authorities and detained. What would it mean if Faith declared itself a "Sanctuary Church"?

As I looked at our lectionary for Lent it occurred to me that the stories Jesus told are so often about refuge of one sort or another.

Let's begin by considering the very familiar story of The Good Samaritan.

You know the story. A lawyer comes up to Jesus, as Luke puts it, to test him. He wants to know what he has to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds: Well, you know the law. You tell me. The lawyer knows his law and his faith. He answers "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and

your neighbor as yourself." Jesus tells him that he has the right answer. If he can do this, love God with all that he is and his neighbor as himself, he will live.

The lawyer persists and asks Jesus who is his neighbor at which point Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was stripped, robbed and beaten by a gang. It seems to me, part of the problem with our modern hearing of this story is that it is so familiar. We know the story - not just the Biblical account of the story. We know it because everyday we hear on the news or see on Facebook accounts of people who are robbed and beaten and left for dead. We know this story. When we are daily bombarded with horrific accounts of people left for dead, we run the risk of being the ones who walk by on the other side. After all, there is just so much misery we can take. Maybe we are numb to the story.

And, we also know the part about those who walk by and do nothing because...why? Because we are rushing somewhere and don't have time? Because we feel inadequate to help? Because it might be dangerous? Because our religious obligations forbid touching someone like that? Our excuses are too numerous to mention.

We know, too, the Samaritans in our world. The Samaritans are not simply those we think of as "other". They are the enemy. Jews thought Samaritans were something as vile as terrorists. We probably cannot overestimate the antipathy Jews felt toward Samaritans. None the less, Jesus felt the obligation to reach out to them. In chapter 9 of Luke, Jesus sends his messengers into a Samaritan village where they are not met with a welcome committee, to put it mildly. They refused to welcome Jesus and the disciples want to know if Jesus wants that they should command fire to come down from heaven and wipe 'em all out! Of course, Jesus says no, and they move on.

The Samaritans – they were not just bad neighbors. They were despised. They were hated, which makes Jesus' telling of this parable all the more remarkable.

The priest walks by. The holy, prestigious Levite walks by. But the hated and despised Samaritan stops. He doesn't just stop. Moved with pity, he bandages the victim's wound, he hoists him up on his donkey, and he takes him to an inn where he gives the inn keeper some money and instructions to take care of him.

We know this story...because it is about all of us. At some point, haven't we found ourselves in the ditch? At some point, haven't we been the ones who just kept going? At some point, hopefully, were we the ones who stopped and gave refuge to the wounded, the vulnerable, the refugee?

The Good Samaritan, after all, is a story about loving our neighbors to the point where we pick them up out of the ditch and offer them safety. The Good Samaritan is a story about providing sanctuary.

The second story we heard this morning is perhaps less clearly about sanctuary. The story about the two sisters, Mary and Martha, is also familiar. As Jesus and his friends kept going they come to a village where a woman, Martha, welcomes them into her home. That's about sanctuary isn't it? Martha provides a safe place that is warm and where there is food for the travelers on their way to Jerusalem. While Martha busily works in the kitchen fixing dinner, her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to what Jesus says. Martha gets upset and wants to know why Jesus doesn't tell her sister to help her whereupon Jesus says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (v.41-41)

Traditionally, we women have been asked, "Are you a Mary or a Martha?" Are we the one who keep everything working and in order? Or are we the dreamy one who spends her days in contemplation? I have decided that this choice is unfair and may not have been Jesus' intended point at all. Perhaps the story about Mary and Martha isn't about how one role is better than the other. Perhaps it is a story about defending a woman's right to choose. Martha's work was traditional for her day, maybe even for ours. The fact that Mary is allowed to sit at Jesus' feet, to be a student of Jesus was unthinkable in Jesus' time. It was unthinkable that a woman would be allowed to sit at the teacher's feet. Jesus defends Mary's right to choose.

And, what is it that Mary chooses? Howard Thurman, the great American spiritual mentor who we just studied in our adult forum, writes that we have an outer life and an inner sanctuary. Sometimes, he writes, it is hard to know that we are in fact one: the outer life is made up of things we do – our relationships, our work and play, job, people and things. Martha represent an outer life. On the other hand, the inward sanctuary "is the place where I keep my trust with all my meanings and my values. It is the quiet place where the ultimate issues of my life are determined. What I know of myself, my meaning; what I know of God, His meaning; all this, and much more, is made clear in my secret place." (P.173-4 Meditations of the Heart) Thurman concludes that we need both the outer sanctuary and the inner one because the outer one will have no meaning without the inner one. In other words, we need to be both Martha and Mary – the one who provides physical sanctuary and the one who has the sanctuary within.

I always think of the writer, Frederick Buechner's story about his father who committed suicide when Buechner was a small boy. Later, Buechner came to realize that, as accomplished and intelligent as he was, his father had no real home within himself. In other words, he had no inner sanctuary, no inner refuge that gave meaning to his life. Or, as the great poet, Billy Joel, put it in his song, And So It Goes: "In every heart there is a room; A sanctuary safe and strong to heal the wounds from lovers past until a new one comes along". Perhaps that is what Mary found when she sat at Jesus' feet: A sanctuary safe and strong to heal the wounds.

The fact is that what the Good Samaritan did, what Martha did and what Mary did was all work. There is the work of physically rescuing the person in the ditch. There is the work of making our homes places of welcome. There is the work of tending our inner homes, our sanctuaries of the heart. That work...is never done!