

July 21, 2019
Luke 10:38-42

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

One of my favorite movies is a classic from 1993, *Grumpy Old Men*¹. John Gustafson (played by Jack Lemon) and his longtime rival and neighbor Max Goldman (played by Walter Matthau), both retired, are the grumpy old men who continually pull pranks on one another and are just a bit cantankerous in their older years. That is, until a new neighbor moves into town, Ariel (played by Ann Margret). She is a breath of fresh air challenging the men to enjoy life and break free from their grumpiness. In one scene, she and John are outside on a cold winter day with snow covering the frozen ground of Wabasha, MN when suddenly Ariel falls to the ground and begins making snow angels. Upon invitation by Ariel to join her, John initially is reluctant. But as she continues to prod, he finally says, "Ah, what the heck" and lays on the ground and joins in. Instantaneously, the viewer sees the joy on his face doing something he hasn't done in years. A sense of liberation and freedom come over John that, apparently, he hadn't experienced in a while.

Our gospel lesson this morning is one that has been unpacked and explained in a wide variety of ways. For example, maybe you have heard an interpretation that pits the two sisters against one another. Mary, the one who sits at Jesus' feet, is portrayed as a model of devotion and faithfulness while Martha, who diligently completed other tasks of hospitality for their guest and was frustrated Mary was not assisting, is portrayed somewhat as the villain who is unfaithful, distracted, and not as devoted to Jesus. Be more like Mary, less like Martha.

This week I came across a new take, at least for me, on a familiar passage. Might this text might be one of liberation. Following on the heels of last week's Good Samaritan text this portrait of freedom does seem to fit. Recall a lawyer came before Jesus and asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life to which Jesus asked him what was written in the law. The man responded, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Then notice Jesus' response, "You have answered correctly, do this and you will live." To live may be translated in a

variety of ways. It can mean to experience real life, to breathe, to be full of vigor, fresh, as well as endless life. Living in the love God offers first, enables us to respond by loving God and loving our neighbor, which in turn brings us to the state of life in all its fullness. Freedom from turning inward on the self.

What if today's text is indeed one of liberation? Brooke DeJong writes the following commentary on our gospel passage:

I think Jesus, and the Gospel writer who dutifully recorded this interaction, meant well. It's a fairly radical idea: a woman would be invited to, and then praised for, sitting and listening to a teacher when there's domestic work that needs doing. The trajectory of this text seeks to liberate. However, the church has often fallen short of that when Mary and Martha are turned into archetypes and an excuse to scold and belittle the work and witness of people who live out their faith through hospitality, particularly women.

Again, the thrust of the text seeks to liberate. We might distinguish, then, not between Marys and Marthas, but between domestic work that is liberating—and can be seen as an opportunity for living out a communal call from God to hospitality and love and care for neighbor—and domestic work that is oppressive and harms communities and individuals and groups within communities. The story of the hospitality Sarah, Abraham and the servant showed the three strangers is helpful to pair closely with the Gospel text. Looking at the two text together, we can ask: Why does only Mary get to listen to Jesus while Martha works? Why do both Sarah and Abraham get to listen (and work) together? How might Martha be freed to listen to Jesus? How might Mary be invited into sharing the ministry of hospitality, and still free to listen, too?

The trajectory of the text seeks to liberate, and when we think about what that means today, we can think about water. Many people in the world don't have easy access to clean water, and in areas where people need to travel long distances to collect water, women and children often spend hours a day on that task. If this task can be moved closer to home and made safer — liberation. Going to school becomes possible, kids being able to play and just be kids becomes possible. Women can go to school, work, or tend to the work of family and home in a way that was not possible

before. Rather than distinguish between Marys and Marthas, we can see how improving conditions for everyone makes it possible for everyone to feel like sitting and listening at the teacher's feet is a viable option.ⁱⁱ

Take for instance the voice of DIKO Marie, a teenage girl living in the village of Niem in the Central African Republic.ⁱⁱⁱ Daily DIKO goes to a well with a 5-gallon bucket to get water. This on top of sweeping the house and yard, washing dishes and preparing coffee and food when they have it, and working in the fields. When she has the time, she likes to go to the market to be with her friends.

Yet, in DIKO's village, the Central African Republic, and many other countries around the globe, access to safe drinking water is not always possible. The fact is in the Central African Republic 1 out of every 4 or 5 children die before the age of 5 due to water-borne diseases or Malaria. All preventable deaths. DIKO, herself, experienced the debilitating effects of having to drink tainted water when 2 of the wells she travelled to with her 5-gallon bucket suddenly began working improperly. She and many others had no other option than to drink from the parasite laden water which resulted in leaving her suffering from stomach cramps and diarrhea. She couldn't eat and was forced to lay in bed as she recovered. She is fortunate to have survived.

Through the assistance of a program called PASE operated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Central African Republic and supported by ELCA World Hunger new water boxes were installed that once again provided safe drinking water. DIKO was no longer sick. In her words, "the people were so happy. They danced for joy." She now had more time to devote to other things. She could go to the market to sell the family's crops, make money and purchase clothes. She could share her thoughts and just enjoy being in the presence of her friends. Hers is a story of liberation and life merely by having access to something we so often take for granted.

According to the United Nations, 2.1 billion people lack access to safely managed drinking water. 340,000 children under 5 die every year from diarrhoeal diseases. Water scarcity affects 4 out of every 10 people.^{iv} Strides are being made in reducing these numbers. Our gifts of benevolence that go to support ministries of the church such as ELCA World Hunger (<https://www.elca.org/hunger>) are one such way we are responding to the freedom we have been given through Christ.

As we gather to listen to the voice of our Lord and Savior, we are given new life through the gift of his life and the resurrection of his body and we are liberated to serve our neighbor.

Jesus did liberate Mary in a radically new way in a culture and context in which women were often not afforded. Perhaps, through this, she was better equipped and able to meet her sister Martha and help come alongside her ministry of hospitality and provide her the freedom DIKO experienced from having safe drinking water. How might the good news of Jesus Christ free us to come alongside a neighbor in need? Who might that neighbor be? A child burdened under the weight of a 5-gallon bucket of water. A friend or relative caring for an aging parent or loved one with a crippling illness. A child in need of a warm meal and the compassionate embrace of a loving parent. Women continually viewed by some as inferior to their male counterparts.

ⁱ *Grumpy Old Men*; 1993; written by Mark Steven Johnson; directed by Donald Petrie.

ⁱⁱ Brooke De Jong; ELCA World Hunger Sermon Starters.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jj0shQtQxgY&feature=youtu.be>

^{iv} <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/water/>