

THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (PROPER 11C)

Colossians 1:15-28, Psalm 15, Luke 10:38-42

July 17, 2016

St. Mark's-in-the-Valley Episcopal Church, Los Olivos, California

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Not shifting from hope

Gracious God, your Son took on human flesh in poverty for our sake: when we prosper, save us from pride, when we are needy, save us from despair, that we may trust in you alone; through Jesus Christ our Savior and Friend. Amen.

Based on the Additional Collects, The Church of England

There's an old riddle that goes like this:

"A father and his son were in a car accident. The father dies at the scene. The boy, badly injured, is rushed to a local hospital. In the hospital, the operating surgeon looks at the boy and says, "I can't operate on this boy. He's my son. How can this be if the father just died?"

In a recent study – 80 percent of those hearing this riddle did not get the correct answer.

I heard the riddle told by a Harvard researcher being interviewed by Krista Tippett on her *On Being* radio program. The researcher, Mahzarin Banaji, spoke of telling the riddle in a lecture. She said, "I saw a woman recently who, when she heard the right answer, she hit her head on the table in front of her. And later when she came up to speak to me

with a big bruise on her forehead, I said to her, 'I see that you didn't get the answer and I saw what you did. But it's not – I understand the frustration, but you shouldn't have hit yourself so hard.' And she said, 'Of course I should have. My mother is a surgeon.'"

So, yes, the surgeon in the riddle was the boy's mother.

Mahzarin Banaji, who told that riddle on Krista Tippett's show, is a professor of social ethics in the Psychology Department at Harvard University. She's also the co-author of *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*, and she's the creator of the Implicit Association Test which has been taken by over 17 million people.

Banaji studies human thinking and feeling as it unfolds in social contexts. She's a pioneer of the science of implicit or unconscious bias, which is helping people become aware of the

unintentional blindspots we bring to our encounters with difference. (Like thinking that surgeons are male, even when we know better.) She's helping take our grappling with these mental systems out of the realm of guilt and into transformative good.

Banaji calls the mind a "difference-seeking machine" — and notes that it helps us order and navigate what could be the overwhelming complexity of reality. And, at the same time, this gift creates blind spots and biases, as we fill in what we don't know with the limits of what we do know.

Banaji says: "I do believe that, in our culture and in many cultures, we are at a point where our conscious minds are so far ahead of our less conscious minds. We must recognize that and ask people the question, 'Are you the good person you yourself want to be?' And the answer to that is no, you're not. And that's just a fact."

Thus the title of Banaji's book: *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People...*

We are hearing a bit more about implicit bias in the face of the cycle of extreme violence that we seem to be caught in these days, when Sunday after Sunday we arrive here in church having suffered yet another blow exacted by someone in the grip of delusions and destructive fear that

imprisons and misshapes egos, distorts relationships and disfigures actions.

So implicit or unconscious bias (as well as explicit and conscious bias) — keep us from being the good people we want to be and, more importantly, who we are created to be.

Which brings us to Mary and Martha and this reading from Luke's gospel this morning.

Always this story presents a dichotomy — this or that, one or the other — and, I'm sure some of you recall when faced with these choices (a little like one of Professor Banaji's Implicit Association Tests), I ask us to imagine what if both are true or what if we are both — both Mary and Martha in this case.

But that isn't Martha's question, which is "why can't Mary be more like me?" She presents her case as industrious, overworked, responsible... much that is valued in our culture.

And Jesus and this telling of the story seems to play into the right or wrong scenario — calling Martha "distracted" by what she's doing and Jesus saying: "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The better part — what is it?

Mary recognizes the fullness of the presence of God on earth, here and now, available and embracing all people and the

whole of the natural world. Martha, in her love of Jesus, recognizes the same thing though pulled away momentarily by her thoughts and her work – as I so frequently am – and as I imagine most of us are daily.

We hear about “the better part” in this remarkable reading from Colossians – that I urge you to read again from time to time during this coming week – “Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

The basis of our goodness, of all human goodness is the vastness of all of God, God’s unending and undying compassion, God’s constantly creative action in and through all human action and beyond human action in the natural and cosmic unfolding of our universe and universes beyond ours.

The point of Jesus and of Mary’s attention to him, and our attention to him is not that we are superior to others or that our sect or religion is exclusive – as Jesus (I remind again) was not a Christian. The revelation Jesus made and makes in his life and in

his death, in his drawing all people to his table and his meal, his communion, is the totality of God *for and in* the totality of reality, of life – all one – or as in this reading from Colossians: the Sacred and Divine Presence in whom “...all things hold together.”

We are called, perpetually and urgently in these days, to choose the better part, as Mary does, to lay aside distraction as much as we can, as Jesus urges Martha to do – both things each of us can do – and to embrace the interconnection that extends from life itself to us and beyond us. It is the source of our goodness and can lead us beyond fear, beyond bias, beyond all the false separations that are constantly bedeviling us, beyond all of our limitations and confusions, beyond ego, beyond violence – either subtle or explicit, beyond destruction and into being whole, lively, and loving co-creators with the eternal divine and sacred spirit.

The better part is what the world needs and in God has been given and is continually being given. Again, it is here in the reading from Colossians, may it be more and more and forever in us and rising in all of humanity for whom it is intended by God:

“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to

reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.”



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