



St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Delray Beach, Florida
8 Pentecost - Proper 11 - Year C (RCL), July 18, 2010
Amos 8:1 - 12; Ps. 52 or 15; **Luke 10:38-42**
Preacher: The Reverend Canon William H. Stokes, *Rector*

The Vatican said what?!

Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her...Luke 10:42

As you may have heard, the Vatican issued revisions to internal laws making it easier to discipline sex-abuser priests. That was a good thing. The problem was, they also decided to include a statement within that same document declaring that ordaining women as priests was “as grave an offense as pedophilia.”¹

According to a *New York Times* report about the Vatican's statement, “The decision to link the issues appears to reflect the determination of embattled Vatican leaders to resist any suggestion that pedophilia within the priesthood can be addressed by ending the celibacy requirement or by allowing women to become priests.”²

The Times story continued, “The overall document codified existing procedures that allow the Vatican to try priests accused of child sexual abuse using faster juridical procedures rather than full ecclesiastical trials.”³ A Vatican spokesman indicated that the changes “showed the church's commitment to tackling child sexual abuse with ‘rigor and transparency.’”⁴ But, according to *The Times*, “Those measures fell short of the hopes of many advocates for victims of priestly abuse, who dismissed them as ‘tweaking’ rather than a bold overhaul. The new rules do not, for example, hold bishops accountable for abuse by priests on their watch, nor do they require them to report sexual abuse to civil authorities — though less formal ‘guidelines’ issued earlier this year encourage reporting if local law compels it.”⁵ What astonished many Catholics, the *Times* states, “was the inclusion of the attempt to ordain women in a list of the more grave...offenses, which included pedophilia, as well as heresy, apostasy and schism.”⁶

“It is very irritating that they put the increased severity in punishment for abuse and women's ordination at the same level,” stated Christian Weisner, spokesman for ‘We Are Church,’ a liberal Catholic reform movement founded in 1996 in response to a high-profile sexual abuse case in Austria. He added, “It tells us that the church still understands itself as an environment dominated by men.”⁷

The *Times* article also included comments from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. According to the *Times*, “Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl of Washington, a top official in the group, called the document a ‘welcome statement’ even as he took pains to praise the role of women in the church. ‘The church's gratitude to women cannot be stated strongly enough,’ he said at a news conference in Washington. ‘Women offer unique insight, creative abilities and unstinting generosity at the very heart of the Catholic Church.’ Still, the archbishop added. ‘The

Catholic Church through its long and constant teaching holds that ordination has been, from the beginning, reserved to men, a fact which cannot be changed despite changing times.”⁸

In the Church of England last week there was also a row over the role of women. For more than 30 years, the Synod of the Church of England has been slowly and steadily moving toward ordaining women as bishops. This has upset traditionalists. The two Archbishops of the Church of England, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, and John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, proposed a compromise that would allow traditionalists who oppose women bishops to be under the authority of male bishops.⁹

There was strong opposition to the Archbishops’ proposal from those who felt this would undermine the authority of those women called to be bishops. Parenthetically, when our Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori was invited to preach at Southwark Cathedral in London in June, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked her not to wear her miter, symbol of her Episcopal office. She honored his request respectfully, but there was widespread outrage over the fact that the request had been made.¹⁰

After heated argument in the Church of England Synod, this past Monday, the compromise proposal was voted down 214 - 191. The Church of England is moving forward toward the ordination of women bishops and there will not be any accommodation made for those who do not accept their authority. It appears that there will not be two classes of bishops in the Church of England - males with full authority and females with less than full authority - a bishop will be a bishop; although, because of their complex process, no woman will be ordained to the episcopate before 2014.

Predictably, when the vote was announced by Church of England, the Vatican issued a statement stating that the ordination of women to the Episcopate, that is, to the order of Bishops in the Church of England, would present further obstacles to the unity of the two churches.¹¹

In an interesting twist, one of the United Kingdom’s leading Progressive rabbis intervened in the Church of England’s debate over women bishops. According to *The Jewish Chronicle On-Line* as well as a story reported in *The Times of London*, “Rabbi Alexandra Wright, senior rabbi of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS), St John’s Wood, for the past six years, made her appeal in an open letter to Dr Rowan Williams.¹²

Rabbi Wright, ordained in 1986, is the seventh female rabbi to be ordained in the United Kingdom. In her letter, she wrote to Rowan Williams, “Archbishop, you have some of the finest women working as priests in the Church of England. For goodness sake, ordain them as bishops. They are the lifeblood of a Church whose future must be built not on the biological origins of the founder of your religion, but on the Jewish values that taught him to love his neighbour as himself and to see in all humanity the image of God.”¹³

In her letter she also wrote, "Does God really want us to perpetuate the discrimination and prejudice that existed towards women during the period of the Roman occupation of Judea or the Crusades?...Why can't we lay the skeletons of social prejudices and archaic attitudes to rest and accept that none of us can do without the contributions of women and men in our religious communities?"¹⁴ Why not indeed?

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help

me." But the Lord answered her, "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." (Luke 10:38-42)

It is a story with which most of us are familiar. It is typical to approach this text as an example of two types of spirituality: one a spirituality of busyness and doing, a kind of a works theology – the spirituality of Martha; the other a spirituality of listening and being, the spirituality of Mary - with the story seeming to uphold the latter as preferred.

Certainly, the story as it is told in Luke invite this kind of comparison, although, as well known preacher Fred Craddock warns, “we must not cartoon the scene: Martha up to her eyeballs in soapsuds, Mary pensively on a stool in the den, and Jesus giving scriptural warrant for letting dishes pile high in the sink. If we censure Martha too harshly,” Craddock notes, “she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she’ll sit there forever.” He concludes, quite rightly I think, “There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment.”¹⁵

Connecting the story of Martha and Mary with the story which precedes it in Luke’s Gospel, the story of the Good Samaritan, and understanding the Good Samaritan as an example of “going and doing,” Craddock writes, “If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be yes.”¹⁶

N.T. Wright, who recently stepped down as Bishop of Durham, and who is a pretty conservative theological voice in the Church of England, also connects the story of Martha and Mary with the story of the Good Samaritan in his commentary *Luke for Everyone*.¹⁷ Given his reputation for theological conservatism, I find what he has to say somewhat surprising, right and welcome.

He begins his treatment of Martha and Mary by writing, “If you think ‘the good Samaritan was radical, this little story suggests that Luke has plenty more where that came from...’”¹⁸ According to Wright, “The real problem between Martha and Mary wasn’t the workload that Martha had in the kitchen. That, no doubt, was real enough, but it wasn’t the main thing that was upsetting Martha.” “Nor was it,” he writes, “that both sisters were romantically attracted to Jesus and Martha was jealous of Mary’s adoring posture, sitting at Jesus’ feet....No, the real problem,” Wright states, “is that *Mary was behaving as if she were a man*.”¹⁹

He explains, “in that culture, as in many places in the world to this day, houses were divided into male ‘space’ and female ‘space’ and male and female roles were strictly demarcated as well. Mary had crossed an invisible but very important boundary within the house and another equally important boundary within the social world.”²⁰

He continues, “The public room was where the men would meet; the kitchen, and other quarters unseen by outsiders, belonged to the women. Only outside, where little children would play, and in the married bedroom, would male and female mix. For a woman to settle down comfortably among men was bordering on the scandalous. Who did [Mary] think she was? Only a shameless woman would behave in such a way.”²¹

“In the same way,” Wright observes, “to sit at the feet of a teacher was a decidedly male role. ‘Sitting at someone’s feet’ doesn’t mean...a devoted dog-like adoring posture, as though the teacher was a rock-star or sports idol. When Saul of Tarsus sat at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), he wasn’t gazing up adoringly and thinking how wonderful the great rabbi was; he was listening and learning, focusing on the teaching of his master, putting it together in his mind. To sit at someone’s feet meant, quite simply, to be their student. And to sit at the feet of a rabbi

was what you did *if you wanted to be a rabbi yourself.*²² Wright concludes, “There is no thought here of learning for learning’s sake. Mary has quietly taken her place as a would-be preacher and teacher of the kingdom of God. Jesus affirms her right to do so.”²³

I like his reading and think it also has relevance for today. If Jesus broke barriers in his time and place, why shouldn’t we break them today? I am puzzled by those in Rome, by those in England and even, still, by some in this country, who are troubled by the idea of the ordination of women to the priesthood or to the episcopate. What is so threatening?

When the ordained ministry at any level excludes fifty percent of the population for reasons of gender and gender alone, the ministry of Christ is diminished and weakened. I am thankful that I am part of a church where all of our wives and sisters, daughters and granddaughters can, if they are so moved by the Spirit, respond to Christ’s call and enter the ordained ministry. In my experience as a priest and leader of the Episcopal Church, I have found that the ministry of women among the ordained – our Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, my friend and the Bishop of El Camino Real, Mary Gray Reeves, my colleague Kathleen Gannon – and so many others has only enriched us. Thanks be to God, they, and so many others, have chosen the better part. It is time for Rome and England to recognize that we are not going backwards; that the better part will not be taken away from them; nor should it be.

¹ Donadio, Rachel “Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir” - *New York Times*, July 15, 2010 – See http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/world/europe/16vatican.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Vatican&st=cse

² “Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir”

³ “Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir”

⁴ “Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir”

⁵ “Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir”

⁶ “Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir”

⁷ “Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir”

⁸ “Vatican Revises Abuse Process, but Causes Stir”

⁹ See Davies, Matthew “Church of England advances plan for women bishops” which appeared on *Episcopal Life Online* on July 12, 2010 at http://www.episcopal-life.org/79425_123415_ENG_HTM.htm

¹⁰ See Schjonberg, Mary Frances “Lambeth Palace tells Presiding Bishop not to wear symbol of office” which appeared on *Episcopal Life Online* on June 16, 2010 at http://www.episcopal-life.org/79425_122968_ENG_HTM.htm

¹¹ See Butt, Riazat “Church divided: Women bishops an obstacle to unity, Vatican warns” from the July 9, 2010 issue of *The Guardian* – [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/09/anglicanism.catholicism>

¹² See Rucker, Simon “Ordain women, rabbi urges the Archbishop” *The Jewish Chronicle Online* – July 15, 2010 at <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/35753/ordain-women-rabbi-urges-archbishop>

¹³ “Ordain women, rabbi urges The Archbishop”

¹⁴ “Ordain women, rabbi urges The Archbishop”

¹⁵ Craddock, Fred B *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible-Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) p. 152

¹⁶ Craddock, p. 152

¹⁷ Wright, Tom *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK - Westminster John Knox Press, 2004)

¹⁸ Wright pp. 129-130

¹⁹ Wright p. 130

²⁰ Wright p. 130

²¹ Wright p. 130

²² Wright p. 131

²³ Wright p. 131