

On-line dictionaries define “uppity” as “Taking liberties or assuming airs beyond one's station; presumptuous.” It is an adjective most often applied to those in society who are expected to know their place as second-class citizens but who refuse to stay in that place. When I was growing up, I heard it applied to kids, people of color, and, of course, women. In recent years, what was meant as an epithet has become a badge of honor to those struggling to gain a sense of equality denied to those of their race or sex. A now-defunct feminist journal was called “Uppity Women Magazine.” Its website proclaims, “This is a place for uppity women. You know who you are. You are a woman who refuses to keep your place, to limit yourself in any way, to live down to others' expectations. You are a woman who gets up again and again, every time life knocks you down. You've learned how to survive.” There's an all women's theatre troupe that calls itself That Uppity Theatre Company. According to their website, “Our name reflects who we are: Bold, brave, willing to step outside the status quo in order to instigate social change, promote civic dialogue and produce transformative theatrical art of the highest quality.”

If you hadn't figured it out yet, I have a great deal of admiration for uppity people. They remind me of how far our society still is from the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God, while at the same time inspiring me to stand up for anyone at the short end of a power equation. I think I come by this love of the underdog naturally. I come from a long line of people who were looked down upon by society's elite. Some of my ancestors came to this country looking for opportunity, only to be greeted by signs saying, “Irish need not apply.” Others were here long before any European settlers, only to be chased from their ancestral lands in the verdant foothills of the Appalachians and the bountiful hunting grounds of Montana and the Dakotas. Perhaps more importantly, I grew up surrounded by uppity women. Both of my grandmothers were charming Southern ladies and both had backbones of iron, which they displayed upon necessity. Nearly all of my aunts were and are an opinionated, unbowed bunch. My mother's streak of uppity-ness diminished along with her health but it is still what is remembered most by those who knew her the best. I married an uppity woman, which I'll bet y'all have figured out by now, and I seem to be raising one as well. Being the parent of an uppity woman can be difficult in the daily workings of life but it gives me great hope for the future.

So it was with great delight that I found that many of the lectionary readings for this morning deal with uppity women. There is a great diversity in the lectionary to choose from this week because this Sunday coincides with the traditional Roman Catholic feast day of St. Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles. So among the possible Old Testament readings and Gospels, one finds stories of the matriarch Sarah, Ruth the Moabitess, the ever-controversial Mary of Magdala, and, finally, Martha and Mary of Bethany. Uppity women, each and every one.

The story of Sarah is one that reminds us that sometimes even uppity women can embarrass themselves. It's a story from Genesis 18 and probably a familiar one. The aged Abraham and Sarah, slowing down after a life of adventurous traveling, are snoozing in the midday heat at their encampment under the oaks of Mamre. Three strangers approach and Abraham, suspecting that they are messengers from God, offers them hospitality. As they take their refreshment, they ask about Sarah, who has remained discreetly inside the tent. According to the Scripture, “Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old,

advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." Sarah was a crusty old dame. She knew what she thought and she thought that the strange man was talking nonsense. Out of a sense of hospitality she declined to laugh out loud but she was certainly snickering under her breath. Imagine her surprise and consternation when her guest called her on her unspoken disbelief. It's disconcerting for even an uppity woman to have her mind read, especially when the thought is less than generous. I can't help but feel, however, that the Lord is an appreciator of uppity women. The response to the laugh seems as amused to me as the laugh itself.

Ruth likewise strikes me as a fine example of an uppity woman. I hope you remember the basics of the story. A man named Elimelech of the tribe of Benjamin takes his wife, Naomi, and his sons into the country of Moab to escape from a famine. While they are there, the boys marry Moabite women. Elimelech dies and so, tragically, do his sons. There is nothing for Naomi to do but see her daughters-in-law off to their parents' homes and return herself to her own country. It was the expected thing to do in that society. Childless widows could only expect to be taken in and cared for by blood kin. Naomi must have been a loveable woman; at first, both younger women refuse to leave her. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, finally goes back to her family but the other, Ruth, refuses. "Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!'" Ruth is an uppity woman. She has given her love and allegiance to her late husband's mother and no tragedy or societal norm is going to change her mind. She is determined to share whatever fate awaits Naomi in a land where she has never been, indeed, where she may be met with hostility and rejection. It turns out well for Ruth in the end. Thanks to her continued uppity-ness, she hooks up with Naomi's cousin, a wealthy landowner, and is the eventual great-grandmother of King David. But there was certainly no way for Ruth to have known that as she abandoned her homeland. As That Uppity Theatre Company would put it, she is "Bold, brave, willing to step outside the status quo."

The story of the Magdalene in the Roman lectionary for today is that of her meeting the Risen Lord in the garden on Easter morning. She's certainly uppity that morning, speaking right up to a strange man she thinks may have information. But there are plenty of indications in the Gospels that Mary is an uppity woman, even if we don't accept the ancient tradition that she had been a prostitute. She is one of the women who follow Jesus as a disciple, a scandalous thing for a woman in those days. Unlike the men, she and the other women stay close to Jesus when he is crucified. They are brave because they are uppity. They are the ones who go to the tomb on the first morning of the week and run back to report what they have seen, even though the testimony of women was not accepted as legal proof. Mary, that red-headed saint, earns the title of uppity woman again and again. The non-Biblical theories about her life seem mostly designed to explain away her brashness as part of a sinful nature or to domesticate her as a dutiful wife. It's

been hard for the male dominated clergy over the centuries to simply accept the title given to her by ancient Christians – Apostle to the Apostles.

It seems pretty easy to label Martha as an uppity woman, too. She certainly doesn't have any trouble speaking her mind. In our story this morning it's pretty easy to hear her as being right up in Jesus' face. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." This isn't the only time in the Gospels that Martha scolds Jesus and tells him what to do, either. In John 11, we read of her reaction to Jesus following the death of her brother, Lazarus. She had sent for Jesus when Lazarus was ill but Jesus delayed his coming until his friend had died. When Martha hears that Jesus is coming, she goes out to meet him on the road. This uppity woman is going to give her friend a piece of her mind. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Martha's apparently pretty comfortable being frank with Jesus about what she wants.

But what of Mary? Generally, Mary of Bethany is thought of as the quiet sister, contemplative, sweet. But she's got an uppity streak in her that may be deeper than Martha's. You see, by abandoning her sister in the kitchen and sitting at Jesus' feet to hear him teach, Mary is committing an incredibly uppity act. Everyone in those days knew that a woman's place when company came was in the kitchen, preparing the food. Even the uppity Sarah retreated to the tent to cook when Abraham had visitors. Women were not permitted to be students of Torah. But Mary dares to leave her appointed place and join the other disciples, just like a man. She even takes the place of the most avid student, right at Jesus' feet. In her quiet way, she is a truly uppity woman, "a woman who refuses to keep (her) place, to limit (her)self in any way, to live down to others' expectations."

The question comes, why is Jesus pleased with the actions of the one uppity woman and not the other? What's going on here? Is Jesus really, as so many monastics have claimed, endorsing the contemplative path over the active? That seems unlikely to me. After all, Luke tells this story immediately after relating Jesus' encounter with the lawyer, the young man to whom he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. After Jesus tells the story and the lawyer admits that the Samaritan acted as a neighbor to the wounded man, Jesus says to him, "Go and do likewise." "Go and do," not "sit and think about this." So it's not Martha's faith in action that prompts Jesus to correct her.

You know, Martha reminds me of one of those uppity women I mentioned earlier – my paternal grandmother. Grandma Lucy was a terrific cook. She could whip up a Sunday dinner of fried chicken, fried potatoes, green beans and Waldorf salad that would knock you out. Funny thing, though, you could never get her to sit down and eat with us. Dinner was never ready when we came; she always waited to cook until we got there, even if she knew we were coming. In her tiny house, we sat at the kitchen table and watched her bustle around. Even when we were eating, she was still at the stove, hovering over a peach cobbler, or making more of something that was going fast. In retrospect, it was a little passive aggressive. She wanted us to see how hard she was working to feed us. Martha, it seems to me, is rather the same. Her focus isn't on Jesus and his needs – it's on herself. "Look at me, Jesus, look how hard I'm working for you."

Jesus points out to Martha that she is “worried and distracted by many things.” Author Steve Goodier writes, “The word “worry” itself comes from an old Anglo-Saxon term meaning to choke, or strangle, and that is exactly what it does – it chokes the joy of living right out of its victim.” Some scholars think that Jesus statement, “there is need of only one thing,” may have been meant literally. “Martha, we don’t need chicken *and* lamb. I’d settle for a baloney sandwich. Come sit down with Mary and talk to me.” John Claypool wrote, “Mary somehow sensed that what Jesus needed more in that moment was not something to fill His stomach, but a place where He could unpack His heart.” If Martha reminds me of my Grandma Lucy, Mary reminds me a bit of my mother’s mother, Granny Glaze. Like Grandma Lucy’s house, Granny and Papa Troy’s place was tiny and the kitchen table was right close to the stove. But somehow, Granny always managed to sit down at table with us (except at Thanksgiving, when everybody ate in shifts). Her gift of hospitality included being a part of the conversation, the laughter and the tears and whatever needed to be said in the family. Martha thinks she’s too busy for just talk. And boy, is she mad at Mary for not sharing her sense of what’s important. Instead of listening to what Jesus has to say, she wants him to choose sides between her and her sister and, of course, Martha thinks she’ll be recognized as the good sister. Mary just wants to be near Jesus. In his commentary on Luke, my former professor, Alan Culpepper, wrote, “Martha presumes to tell Jesus what he should do; Mary lets Jesus tell her what she should do.”

It seems that Martha’s actions are driven, not by her love of Jesus, but by her sense of duty, her need to be the perfect hostess, and perhaps by a rivalry with her sister. It is dangerous to undertake even the best work with motives like that. The Rev. Dr. Thomas Long of Candler School of Theology in Atlanta tells a story of a friend who took “a church youth group on a mission trip to Jamaica. On their trip they visited one of the local elementary schools, and they spent some time observing in a classroom seriously overcrowded with children, most of them very poor, all of them needy and wiggly and noisy and unruly. It was a difficult, sometimes even chaotic, learning environment; but the youth group marveled to see that the teacher carried herself with great calm and patience, treating all of the children with love and respect, despite the poverty and the chaos. They decided that the only way she could do this was that she must really love being a teacher. But they were surprised to hear her say, “Oh, I don’t come here everyday mainly because I love teaching. I come here every day because I love Jesus, and I see Jesus in every one of these children.”” To undertake the hard work of building the Beloved Community, we must be motivated by the love of God, not by the supposed virtue of the work itself. The famous Puritan work ethic so prevalent in much of American society, the admonition that “idle hands are the Devil’s playground,” are simply not going to be enough to get us through the work of the Kingdom without bitterness. Hard work can be an idol. It can be just another attempt to earn God’s love, which is freely given. In comparing the way of Martha and the way of Mary, the great American contemplative Thomas Merton wrote, “The rush and pressure of modern life are a form of its innate violence. To allow myself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns... To surrender to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything...is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist...destroys the fruitfulness of one’s own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”

Prior to telling the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus and the lawyer agreed that the key to eternal life is “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.” For the lawyer,

Jesus has to explain who the neighbor is. Perhaps what Mary understood and Martha didn't was the true nature of love. Martha was really focused on herself. Mary was focused on Jesus. That is true love, true devotion, to consider the needs of the other equally with your own. I think it is the key to why all those other uppity women are held up as exemplars in our lectionary verses today. Mary sat at Jesus feet and couldn't be torn away; not by the expectations of her sister or by the prohibitions of her society. John tells us that it was Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus feet with expensive perfume and wiped them with her hair – an act of devotion so extreme as to be scandalous. Luke tells a similar story in another context and the “sinful woman” to whom he attributes the action is often identified with Mary Magdalene. Even if this is a misidentification, the devotion of Mary Magdalene for the Lord can hardly be doubted. She follows him regardless of the danger to her reputation or her life. We remember the story of Ruth not simply because she was an uppity woman who was an ancestor of David and of Jesus but because of her great devotion to her mother-in-law, Naomi. And if you doubt that Sarah was devoted to Abraham, go back and read their story in the early chapters of Genesis. It takes great love for a woman to follow a man all over the known world, leaving her family far behind. Believe me, I know. And Abraham puts Sarah through some incredibly demeaning experiences, surrendering her to a king's harem not once, but twice. Yet she still loves him enough to give him Hagar to ensure his posterity and there they are together, finally, laughing together in their old age at the miracle that has brought them a little boy, the little boy they called Yitzhak, “laughter.”

I try to talk as much as I can about the Good News that God, the Creator of the Universe, loves us, each and every one of us. God loves the Church, the Body of Christ, as a group and God loves us as individuals. I think it's the most important thing the world needs to hear in our warring, uncertain, troubled times. But it's also important for us to talk about how we love God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The stories today tell us how to love our families and our friends, with what level of devotion the great heroines of our faith showered their loved ones. In the case of the women who loved Jesus, it's easy to understand that they are also teaching us how to love God, for we believe that Jesus was and is God, Emmanuel, God With Us. But the faithfulness of Ruth and her love for Naomi during the hard times, the longsuffering love of Sarah for Abraham, these also are models for us of how we should love God. Our times and our lives will not always be easy. We must be prepared to walk with Jesus in the way of the cross, to travel faithfully with God in the places where the work of the redemption of Creation is still ongoing. If we can match the models of devotion shown by these uppity women of the Bible, then we will have the strength, the compassion and the courage we need to impact the world for the Kingdom of God, to help to create the Beloved Community. When we give our hearts to Jesus, when we consecrate our lives to Him, then we can live in ceaseless praise, then we can bring the world the message of God's love. When, like Mary in her devotion, we pour our treasures at Christ's feet, then we will know the true meaning of life abundant and everlasting.