

“Know Your Place”

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Text: Luke 10:38-42

A friend of mine was a professor at Brown University, and he told me that John Kennedy, Jr. had been his student. I asked him how he was at a student, and my friend said Kennedy was frustrated. He was an American Studies major, but he had always dreamed of being an actor.

“Why didn’t he study acting then?” I asked.

The professor looked at me with a steady gaze and said, “Because. The Kennedy’s are not actors.”

It’s fascinating. After being a pastor for twenty years, I know that people are often forced to do or not do all sorts of things, based on an allegiance to family, their sense of responsibility, their commitment to success, or their ideas of status. Whether a person has all the power and advantages, or if they have very little opportunity, it seems that we’re formed by these presumptions of who we are supposed to be. And all of these things look different in different settings.

Where my husband grew up, in Nebraska, he was the first person in his family to go to college. We lived there for a while as we saved money for graduate school. Each time we would gather for a family reunion, I would hear his family members give him lectures about how he needed to remember where he came from. He should never forget his roots. They went out of their way to tell him that *their* pastor never went to seminary, and they didn’t really see the point of it. There was always this underlying disappointment that he was getting too educated and he was going to get too big for his britches.

Then I was in Northern Virginia, right outside of D.C. with my young family. My daughter was just starting kindergarten and there was extreme pressure for the children to get into an Ivy League school. When my daughter was in first grade, the teachers began talking about strategies. I have to admit, I got a little wrapped into it at first. I mean, it’s easy to get narcissistic as a parent, and think of our kid’s success as an extension of ourselves. But then, I would come to my senses and think, *Maybe we should just get the alphabet down before we start putting the pressure on my child to get into Harvard?*

Then in the mountains of rural Tennessee, they would push really brilliant kids, who were voracious readers, into trade schools to become mechanics, and I would plead with parents on behalf of the youth, “But wait! Maybe we could figure something out, so they could go to

school!" But the families couldn't understand going into debt, when their son or daughter could make good money right away.

I work with writers, in order to produce that book that they've always wanted to get published. And I notice, that people often long to write or paint, but they don't want to become artists, because they believe that all artists are broke and alcoholics, and they can't stay married. They think that they need to be unhealthy to be a real creative. They cling to the trope of starving artist or tortured artist. And people imagine that they must be as drunk as Ernest Hemingway or as depressed as Sylvia Plath to be truly great. They imagine that if their souls are not in torment, then they have no business creating.

So, people go throughout their whole lives, wanting to be one thing, and becoming another. And often *that* is when they become unhealthy humans, because they've ignored their vocation, their true calling.

But I will tell you one person who did not do that. It was Mary of Bethany.

Bethany was outside of the capital city, Jerusalem, where the Temple was. It was about 3 and a half miles away. The whole area was occupied by Rome, but Bethany was a bit quieter, without as many soldiers. It was less of a focal point for the occupation.

I imagine Mary, getting her chores done early, and then sneaking off to the Temple with her brother, Lazarus. It about 3 miles, less than a two hour walk on the dusty terrain. When the massive structure came into view against the blue sky, Mary's heart pounded with the weight and beauty of it. The Temple vibrated with history and meaning, it was the core, the center of their religious life. So much of her people's history and narrative hinged on the building or destruction of the Temple. Mary walked with Lazarus to the edge of the women's courtyard on the east as Lazarus walked to the main courtyard on the west. Lazarus looked back at Mary, waving with regret.

You see, there were three courtyards: the court of the Gentiles was on the outside, the court of the women was in the middle, and the court of Israel was in the inside. That inside court was reserved for men who had gone through the purification rituals.

Mary leaned against a pillar, straining to hear the Rabbis reading from the ancient scrolls. She watched with the heat of the sun bearing down upon her, longing to get closer. Mary grew up speaking Greek, but she wanted to learn the guttural, melodies of Hebrew. She longed to be able to unroll a scroll, to feel dry parchment under her fingers. And yet, she always stood on the outside, with the rest of the women, never quite able to hear. Never able to really learn the language and faith of her people.

That is, until Mary met Jesus. The amazing thing about the movement that John the Baptist and Jesus started, was that they went outside of the Temple. Don't get me wrong, Jesus was Jewish, and John the Baptist was from a priestly family. Jesus could be found reading and teaching in

the Temple. But he didn't stay there. There were cleansing rituals in the Temple that a man needed to go through in order to get into that inner courtyard. The rituals and courtyard distinctions cut people off—usually people who were slaves, women, Gentiles, or poor. But then John the Baptist began to preach in the wilderness, and he began to baptize people in the river. And when Jesus was baptized, they broke down any barriers that would keep women and people in poverty from the good news. And when Jesus would go from town to town, and preach on the side of a hill, or by the lakeshore, or in the streets, women could hear him. They could even touch him. Women were no longer relegated to the outer courtyard where they had to strain to listen.

And here, in this profound moment, this scene that we read, Mary is sitting Jesus' feet. Think about that! We are in the Roman Empire. A formal system of education is just beginning to form, based on the Greek system. Boys and girls were educated, but they were separated, and there was no public education, so the quality of your education depended on how much money your family had, and what sort of tutors you could afford. Girls were typically educated by their mothers and they were taught devotion to their husbands and families above all else. The students were not divided up into age groups, they were divided up by ability. And the best student would sit *at the foot of their teacher*.

In this scene that we are witnessing, we see Mary at the feet of the great Rabbi, the great teacher, Jesus. That's the place of the best and brightest *male* student. It's not John, it's not Peter, but it's Mary sitting there. Even though everything in society said that she had no business being there!

Martha is appalled. She tries to get Mary back in the kitchen where she belongs.

But Jesus defends Mary. Jesus says that Mary's seat of honor "will not be taken away from her." Mary chose to ignore everything that told her she should not be in that place—her family, her traditions, even her religion. And Jesus defends her!

Friends, we each have a calling. Something that we long to do, something that we know we *must* do in order to be fuller humans. Whether it is becoming an actor, or furthering your education, or learning to paint, or writing that book, or becoming the top religious student when you're not even supposed to be in the room learning, it is our calling. It may not be the thing that supports your family, and I'm not saying that you need to quit your day job. But, sometimes, we need to ignore all of those voices that tell us what we need to do, all of those messages that tell us where our place is. Because Jesus tore down all of those barriers between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. And through our baptism, we declare that our sole identity is as a son or daughter of God, and we will sit at Jesus' feet.

To the glory of God our Creator,
God our Liberator,
And God our Nurturer. Amen.