

En nomine...

I. Complaints

A. Complaints: Intro

In my former life, before I discovered I was an Episcopal Priest, I went to seminary and served as clergy in the *Stone-Campbell* movement, an evangelical church tradition that finds its origins on the American frontier at the beginning of the 19th century.

Beginning in 2002, that vocation led my wife Becky and I to work as *missionaries* and *church planters* in New York City. One beautiful summer day in New York, Becky and I were returning from an event in Manhattan, going back home to the Bronx. As we changed subway trains we chanced to see a familiar face.

B. Mario's Complaint

Mario was a young man we had met during one of our church planting team's outreach events; he had then come to our house for a "game night." This day on the train, Mario had something on his mind, a request he had been thinking about for some time. Mario was worried about his mother's soul. He was worried that she was Catholic but not Christian. That's a common binary distinction in certain communities: I heard it a lot while studying Spanish in Central America. Mario wanted me to help bring his mother about to his *own way* of understanding faith.

To target Roman Catholic believers for "evangelism" would not be unheard of among some of my evangelical peers. But it didn't sit well with me. It's called "sheep stealing" or "re-shuffling the deck." Still, I was a missionary, a church planter, and step 1 in that endeavor is to build relationships, to gain entry into people's lives. Mario was inviting me in! So we made a date for later that week.

When I arrived at Mario's apartment I did so with some trepidation. I've never been a fan of the hard sell. I've always been suspicious of any person or group that claims exclusive, special access to God. If Mario's mom was a cultural Catholic with no actual faith practice, or perhaps an adherent of *brujería*, the kind of pseudo-Catholic witch-craft that was popular in my neighborhood, I would certainly be eager to invite her to discover what I considered to be a more authentic expression of Christianity. But what I found in Mario's mom was a woman of deep faith, an obvious disciple of Jesus. I *wasn't interested* in disrupting her practice of faith. I spent most of the visit trying to explain gently to Mario that I found his mother to be an excellent model of spiritual life to be admired and emulated!

Mario was... disappointed with our conversation that night.

C. Martha's Complaint

In our Gospel reading today, the actor at the front of the stage is Martha. And she says, “Jesus... we need to talk. It's about Mary. Can you speak to her, please?!?” Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, which expression signifies that Mary is taking the place of a *student* of Jesus or a *disciple* – a traditionally male role. Mary defies convention in her pursuit of a life in relationship with Jesus.

Martha, on the other hand, knows the score: *Jesus* is company and *Mary* is slacking off. Martha has heard the biblical accounts, she *knows* the story we just read from Genesis this morning about the *strangers* who came to visit Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. The example of Abraham is to show hospitality – and to involve the whole household in the effort! The *promise* is that in entertaining strangers, sometimes you will end up with God in your midst, and the results can be surprising: 90-year old spouses suddenly turn up pregnant!

Martha is a faithful daughter of Abraham, she's doing the right thing. But what about Mary? Shouldn't *she* be helping? Isn't that her duty? Isn't that the only right thing to be doing in this situation?

Jesus says, “No.” Maybe Jesus didn't use that exact word, but I'm sure that's what Martha heard! What did she *think* when she heard Jesus' refusal? Did she think Jesus was being dismissive, not even listening? Did she say to herself, “Oh, what a typical male response, wanting to have someone hanging on his every word! **But those garbanzo beans aren't going to mash themselves!**” Did she think Jesus was acting cold and uncaring? Martha was... disappointed with their conversation that night.

II. Gospel Surprise

A. *We ask too small; we're blind to the possibilities*

As I struggle to understand Jesus' response, I'm reminded of the collect we prayed this morning:

"Have compassion on our *weakness*, and mercifully give us those things which for our *unworthiness* we dare not, and for our *blindness* cannot ask..."

In our blindness, there are things we don't even *know* to ask. We ask too small. It's like asking Tom Foster to provide a communion hymn when he's planning for Zachary Finkelstein and Tyler Morse to perform Britten's *Abraham and Isaac*! We're talking about a whole different plane of beauty!

So we tend to think too small. It is human nature for us to pray to a god we've created in our own image. A little god, with a convenient carrying tote. We pray with a faith that is human-scaled. We ask God for those things that we think are best, are right, are important. We expect God to see things the way we see them. When God sees things *differently*, when God says "No," **we end up... disappointed with our conversation.** Sometimes we see God's failure to act as allowing a grave injustice or terrible tragedy.

I pray for peace in the world constantly:

so why this week did a disturbed, isolated person drive his truck into a crowd of people in Nice?

B. Martha asks too small

I can totally relate to Martha's confusion and disorientation, her inability to *see* what Jesus is saying, her *blindness* to Jesus' intent. I *like* to follow rules, to meet others' expectations. Jesus has just *stymied* Martha in her quest to carry out what the Bible, her culture, and her own experience all tell her is the appropriate course of action. Jesus said "No" to Martha's *modest* request in order to say "Yes" to a larger petition that she hadn't even dared to think or ask.

Like Abraham before her, Martha was the recipient of a totally unexpected, surprising gift that day. All she *thought* she wanted was a little help with KP. Instead, Jesus invited her to **let go of that** and pay attention to God's desire to do something *much bigger* in her life! The *promise* was of good things at the feet of a God

who is bigger than we are,

who sees further than we see,

who understands more deeply than we understand,

and who wishes us more good than we can *ask or imagine*.

III. Conclusion

A. From Mario to Me

When I visited with Mario and his mother in that Bronx apartment, the stated purpose of our visit was to bring the Good News of Christ to his mother. During the course of our conversation, it became clear to me that God was in the room and God was in fact reaching out to *Mario*. As I have reflected on that evening in the years since, I have realized what was true all along. It wasn't just Mario's mother, or Mario, to whom God was reaching out that night: it was all three of us! **God is like that.** God brought *me* that night face to face with some of the "no's" that made me uncomfortable about the faith tradition of my youth. As I reluctantly turned loose of some of my roots, I discovered that the things I valued most from those roots: things like Scripture, Baptism, and Eucharist, are elevated even more in the Episcopal Church than where I came from! That was good.

B. From Good to the unasked-for Great

Then came the surprise,

that which wasn't just *good* but *amazing*;

the things I hadn't even known to ask for.

Chanted Psalms. Sung Eucharists. Holy Week. Simple things like **flowers around the altar.**

The *repetitions* and *variations* of *liturgy* that embed words and phrases and actions *deep* into my soul!

These are the gifts for which I did not *know* to ask, but which I would be *heart-broken* to surrender now. They are for me *new* and *precious* ways to quicken my own awareness of the eternal presence of God who is *near* me and who *loves* me.

C. Invitation

Are you ever, like me, slow to hear Jesus' "no?"

Are you, like me, reluctant to experience the dissonance and pain of leaving behind the familiar?

Are we able to live by faith rather than by sight?

Can you and I relax our compulsive need to control everything

and trust that

letting go,

living into our blindness,

rather than bringing disaster,

will create more space for God to do something even better in our lives?

It takes immense courage.

It's not easy.

But if we want to encounter that ultimate, eternal goodness of God in our lives,

do we have any other choice?