

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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"Patience and Pickles and Thanksgiving Prayers"

Rev. Kathy Duhon

Hello, my name is Martha. I am envied for my hospitality. No, I'm not Martha Stewart, although I'd like to think that she might think of me, her namesake, when she teaches everyone how to entertain.

I am the Martha who was distracted by too many tasks. My little sister Mary is fondly remembered for sitting and listening to Jesus. My brother Lazarus is strongly remembered for his fantastic healing. And me? I am uneasily remembered for complaining that Mary wasn't helping, and for Jesus chiding me when I tried to get him to make her work. Not a great way to be immortalized. Just listen to this prayer that one of your religious leaders, Marian Wright Edelman, wrote, "O Lord, there is too much Martha in me today and not enough Mary. Help me to ... listen." "Too much Martha" -- Geesh!

You've always heard Luke's version of the story, and I cannot fault Luke too much. He was a man, but he wrote well about women -- he noticed us and our importance in Jesus' life. He did recount most of Jesus' stories about women, not like some of the others. And I must say I am pleased that the little story of Jesus' visit to our home enjoys top billing with Luke -- it's right between Jesus telling the parable of the Good Samaritan and Jesus teaching the disciples the Lord's Prayer. Yes, Luke was a good gospel writer, and understanding, but he wasn't there, and it's time you heard my version of the story.

It all started with pickles. Nobody realizes it, but I invented pickles. Well, I admit, it's disputed, but really, I figured it out first. It happened in a strange way. You see, we ate so much lentil stew and bread, and so many olives and grapes and dates, that I found meals BORING. I was impatient always for the few fish that would be available in the market -- something to make

life a little more exciting. I'd buy extra fish on market days, and dry them in the sun with a salt cure and have them to eat later on. Then you can soak them in a little water, some wine vinegar if you're a creative cook like me, and then heat up the fish, and it helps to keep the meals a little more interesting.

Well, one day we had word that Jesus was coming to our village, and everyone was excited. They were all talking about the latest things they'd heard about this Jesus, all the most recent stories. Magdalene told us Jesus' most recent parable about a Samaritan, and I found it strange. This Samaritan sounded like a busy and important fellow, travelling about, flush with money. Now, how did he find the time to take that beaten-up fellow to an inn, dress his wounds, and even return to check on the innkeeper and pay him more if needed? I know it sounds like such a "good" thing to do, especially considering he was a Samaritan, one of them, but I can't understand how he found the patience to deal with it all. Think about it, even if you were kind, wouldn't you be way too busy to get that involved?

When Magdalene was telling us the Samaritan story, I kept thinking about how many things I had to do. I knew Jesus was probably going to stay with us, so I rushed home to clean the house and get some food together. Luckily I still had a few cured fish from the market days, so first I soaked them in water and a little vinegar. I picked some vegetables for a salad. I baked the bread. I stewed the lentils. You might ask what my sister Mary was up to all this time?

Mary did help a little with the cleaning and with chopping the vegetables. But she isn't very efficient, you know. I had no patience for her slow ways when we were about to have important company. After trying to hurry her up all morning, finally I just sent her to the well to get more water. I was rushing to get it all done and I suddenly realized she had just left the chopped vegetables for the salad on the cutting board. Isn't that so typical? She didn't even finish making the salad. I quickly threw the vegetables into a bowl by the table. And off I went to make up the beds, milk the goat, and weave some pretty placemats for the company. I know the placemats weren't necessary, and I was rushed, but I wanted everything to be just right. I was the queen of hospitality -- I bet I could even teach Martha Stewart a thing or two.

I went in to cook the fish, knowing they had soaked long enough to be soft, to have lost the saltiness, and suddenly I realized that I had accidentally thrown the vegetables into the bowl where the fish was soaking. The fish was fine, but all my lovely salad vegetables were sour and salty and soggy, not to mention fishy! Can you imagine? Just then Mary walked in with the water, and I know it wasn't right, but I yelled at her. If she had just finished that salad, this would have never happened. But of course, it wasn't Mary's fault, it was mine -- I had been rushing around too much. Now I was so impatient to fix this problem that I didn't even notice how much I'd hurt Mary's feelings. She didn't say anything, just became very quiet. She and I quickly picked more vegetables from the garden and made a new salad. I cooked the fish and put the strange soaked vegetables aside, thinking at least I could feed them to the goat later on.

Just as we finished preparations for the meal, Jesus arrived and I invited him in. Everything was ready for him and the disciples. Mary and I got right to work. Only, Mary was still feeling bad about me yelling at her, I could tell, and I wanted to apologize, but we were so busy. That's when the mistake happened. Mary was trying so hard to please me that she quickly, efficiently, brought out the meal, including, accidentally, those awful vegetables that had been soaked in fishy salt water and vinegar. Can you believe it? I didn't even notice at first.

We all sat down to eat and Jesus blessed the bread and the wine. Just as the second "*Baruch Atah Adonai*" started, I noticed the vegetable problem. I couldn't believe what I saw on my table. Of course everyone politely ate the salty, sour, soggy, fishy veggies. Made their mouths pucker up when they talked. Mary thought it was funny -- I saw her giggling. (Later on I found out she had dashed on some more vinegar, thinking to help out the dish.) At least everyone liked the lentil stew and someone asked how I made it. I said something about how you had to 'pick lentils' early in the day, but my mouth was all puckery too and it sounded like I said "pickles" instead of "pick lentils". "Pickles," Matthew said politely. "Is that what you call this new dish? I would have called it "fish sticks," myself, what with that fishy taste in the veggie sticks." That's when I excused myself to go to the kitchen. I was so embarrassed and tired and upset. My sister stayed, of course. She didn't want me to yell at her again.

So I did the dishes, and Mary hung out with the guys. Really, she knows better. Everyone thinks a woman's place is in the kitchen, and while Mary and I both know that Jesus thinks of us as disciples, the other disciples are not so gracious -- they would rather we did what women are supposed to do, housework. I do housework, sure, and I have a good reputation for my hospitality, but I prefer to be learning and growing too, not just serving. Mary and I both realize it is a balance, but that day I was mad in the kitchen and she was hanging back, hurt, in the front room. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore. I was impatient with myself and with Mary. I stormed into the room and told Jesus that he should get Mary to help me. I know what you're thinking. I should have asked Mary directly and not angrily, and I shouldn't have waited until I was all but done with the work to fuss about it. I should have apologized, not been so mean-spirited.

Jesus' answer was gentle and concerned. He said I was worried and distracted by many things, that I shouldn't worry about the pickles or the dishes; that I should sit with them too. He said that Mary had just been telling him what a hard day it had been for both of us and how she was concerned about me because I had yelled at her and been so anxious and impatient with everything. He had calmed her down and said that the Spirit would be always available, if only we would ask and seek and knock.

Jesus said I was the "salt of the earth", but if I kept being so impatient and upset about stuff that I'd end up being "full of vinegar". Then he laughed and kept going with his little puns. (You know Jesus was always saying funny things, but none of the gospel writers were very good about writing down the jokes.) He said, "Martha, if you keep adding vinegar to your saltiness, you'll be in a pickle yourself all the time. And if you keep being such a stinker, you'll be like those 'pickle fish sticks' you served us tonight. Pyuuwee!" He was grinning; I couldn't help but smile.

He reminded me to take myself more lightly and to be patient, realizing that the Spirit is always available to give me all I ever need and to help me in every way. No more fretting and fussing – I was resolved. And the next morning, I went to seek for him, knocked, and asked him

to get up and help Mary and I with the household chores, which we did while talking about a prodigal son and a finicky daughter. (I think even Luke forgot to write down the finicky daughter story.)

But I did think about those pickles. What if it wasn't fishy water, but just salt water and vinegar, maybe add a little dill and onions? Mary thought it was a good idea. We experimented and pretty soon everyone was asking for our pickles. I call them "patient pickles," because you have to wait a while for them to be at their best flavor, which seems very appropriate to me. I wait patiently these days, most of the time, and my flavor has certainly improved. When Jesus comes to visit now, he always eats plenty of our "patient pickles." I tell him he's full of salt and vinegar himself, and he just smiles and says that he hopes it makes his blood stronger for the journey to Jerusalem. Sometimes he says the strangest things.

So when you hear about me again, just remember that I quit being so impatient and anxious. My sister and I get along fine – really – and we share both the work and being disciples. Our "patient pickles" have made our family almost as famous as our brother Lazarus's miraculous recovery, but that's another story. Come see us anytime -- we love to have company. Just ask for Martha and Mary's home. We're in Bethany, but you can smell the pickles from miles away!

Thank you for *your* patience. I thought that perhaps a story about patience and food and family and stress would be in order for just now, right before Thanksgiving ushers in the over-stuffed holiday season. But I also want to talk about something else that comes up at this time, which often happens along with the meal – the prayer of thanks.

I appreciate UU minister Robert Walsh's meditation on the prayer he heard his Grandpa give at Thanksgiving, which sounded like one very long word, accented at the beginning and the end: "*Lordmakeusthankfulfortheseprovisionsweaskinchristsakeamen.*" He realized the meaning was there whether he could actually understand the words or not – we come together and wake up to being grateful, though with some prodding. I sometimes wonder if we all need help being

thankful, more than just the reminder of a national holiday with “thanks” in the center of its name.

What I want to know is do we still bother to add thanks to our Thanksgiving gatherings? Many do not pray any more before the big meal, whether out of a shift in theology, a move toward informality, a concern for inclusivity, or just an impatience to get down to the feasting. In my home, I asked everyone to say what they were thankful for before we ate, and that became our simple prayer. Albert Cutie wrote, “Living with an attitude of gratitude ... makes us more realistic, for we realize that nothing just is... and everything is blessing!”

Why is it so important to say thank you? And not just to the cooks and the hosts, but to the universe, or God, or the All in All, the interdependent web of all existence? Gratitude enlarges us, changes us. When we are thankful, we cannot also be prideful; we acknowledge not being in control, we give up being functionally the God of our world. When we are thankful we cannot also be resentful; we give up complaining about our lot in life. When we are thankful, we cannot also be impatient; we give up the stress of many worries and return to the center. When we are thankful, we cannot also be bored or despairing or hateful or hurtful; we give up being self-involved and become aware and appreciative of others and the world. When we are thankful we are mindful, more aware of who we are, of all that is, of the Holy Oneness, of the Holy One.

In the Martha story, Jesus was teaching about patience and letting go of resentfulness and control, but also, and perhaps primarily, about living from the center of one’s life. It turns out that thankfulness is just about the easiest way for most of us to find our centers. Let us give thanks for thanksgiving. Amen.