

“Stay with Me!”: Being with Jesus Then and Now

Martha Jane Petersen

Black Mountain, North Carolina

More than thirty years ago, I sat with several hundred persons in the vast tent-like structure that formed the worship space for the Taizé Community in southern France. All of those present had traveled from far distances as I had: from European, American, and African countries, and even from the Far and Middle East. We were drawn by Taizé’s unique form of worship along with the ecumenical nature of the Community, which bridged Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox faiths as evidenced in our singing. We sang chants and songs in French, German, Spanish, Italian, English, Latin, Greek, Russian, and a few others unknown to me. By the end of the week, most of us knew all the songs by heart, in each language sung. One caught my attention in its brevity:

Bleibet hier und wachet mit mir- wachet und betet, wachet und betet. In German, the song referenced words from the Mark and Matthew accounts of Jesus in Gethsemane as he asked his followers, “Stay with me, remain here with me, watch and pray.”¹

With no other words, the song made me realize the acute physical and emotional need for Jesus to experience companionship from his disciples during his critical hour. Such companionship did not occur, however, in isolation as a one-time need. Mark 3:14 drops a clue about Jesus’ human need to be in the presence of others: “Jesus appointed twelve... *to be with him*, and to be sent out to proclaim the message.” (Italics mine). Additionally, the account of Jesus’ last night in Matthew 26 repeats the word *meta* –“with.” Jesus wanted to share the Passover supper *with* them. He spoke of the betrayer dipping his hand in the dish *with* him and drinking wine in the new kingdom *with* his disciples. These repeated words picture a man desiring deep fellowship with those he had chosen, whom he called “friends” (John 15:14-15).

Did Jesus really need supporters and friends around him? After all, John 2:25 states that Jesus “would not entrust himself to [others] because he knew all people and... knew what was in everyone.” He trusted no one because of their clamoring for more “signs which he did.” Here, John’s words singularly give the impression that, alone, Jesus’ divine powers would enable him to accomplish his mission, with no need for others to support him.

The Synoptics, however, paint a different picture. Matthew’s gospel begins and ends with striking *meta* phrases. In 1:23 we find *Immanuel*: “God with us,” and in 28:20: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Indeed, the incarnational presence of Jesus with his followers serves as bookends for Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus as one determined to accompany/be present to/ have fellowship with those who believe and follow him, during his lifetime and beyond.

In the scene set in Gethsemane’s olive garden, where Jesus often prayed, the Gospel of Mark depicts a Jesus in great need. “He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and agitated, and he said to them ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and keep awake’” (14:34). Douglas Hare points to the REB translation here: “My heart is ready to break with grief.”² Hebrews

elaborates further: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death...” (5:7). Both Mark and Matthew add, “He threw himself [prostrated himself] on the ground,” an act suggesting the extremity of both his desire to submit to the Almighty yet a desperate pleading to avoid death if at all possible.

Along with his grief, distress, and fear, Jesus needed someone to accompany him into the terror of tortured death. Peter, James, and John were the privileged three to walk into Gethsemane with him. They had seen him raise the dead, heal the sick, and be transfigured before their astonished eyes on the mountain. He asked these three to “remain” with him, which in Greek, *meno*, can mean “abide, to continue to be present to, to remain or stay.” *Meno* implies remaining in place even in the midst of hardship. Jesus desired those closest to him to endure the coming storm with him. Instead, he was abandoned by the three sitting in the garden with him. In his ministry he had experienced opposition, betrayal, misunderstanding, but perhaps the worst of distresses to befall him happened when his three leading disciples offered him nothing. Jesus “probably suffered as much from his friends as from his enemies.”³ The three disciples sat near Jesus physically but tuned out his needs three times. They were “not there” for him even after he had pleaded with them, “Stay with me!” Apparently their own need to remedy their exhaustion by sleeping overcame any intentions to be available to Jesus. Perhaps they knew or intuited what was about to befall Jesus since he had predicted his death time after time. Perhaps fear drove them to dismiss Jesus’ plea; they did not want to face the calamity soon coming to him, for it may come also to them.

Jesus also told the three to “watch,” translated in the NRSV as “keep awake.” Be alert, to what is around you and what will come upon us. Be alert in regards to what I am enduring. Instead of succumbing to sleepiness and fatigue, extend yourselves to see and understand what is happening. Even though they are in no way alert or awake, Jesus amazingly does not scold them.

Being present to another person constitutes a challenge for us North Americans. It’s all too easy, however, to offer solutions to problems for a suffering friend. Parker Palmer, noted Quaker teacher, lecturer, and writer, tells of a time in his life when he suffered deep depression. He was bombarded with suggestions from friends and family on what to do about it. One friend, however, offered nothing but his presence. He came every day at 4:00 to massage Parker’s feet in silence, day in and day out for a few months. This deep communion, quiet companionship, and caring “made a huge difference.”⁴

People in crisis usually need someone nearby, not necessarily to do anything, not even to speak, but to give of themselves even in silence. Being attentive is often silent, which challenges us. Empathic presence embodies deep listening. Instead, we squirm, we become distracted, our thoughts wander, we harbor opinions and solutions in our minds, we try with effort to seal our lips against the ready reply to another’s dilemma. Our presence must direct our attention solely on the other person, not ourselves. It may consist of a momentary laying down our lives for the sake of another.

Too often we hold back our presence even in our charitable efforts: to the homeless (we offer food at a shelter but not our companionship); to the physically disabled (we invite a group into our Sunday worship but do not sit with them); and the mentally ill (at a group home we provide refreshments for a party but remain aloof). We tend

to throw our bones and run. Lay persons aligning themselves with Franciscans in charitable actions must agree to move beyond “checkbook charity.” They must be personally present where they help and in what they do. John V. Taylor, notable Anglican mission co-worker in southern Africa some years ago, advises the Christian must align himself with the African foundational practice of presence, “the Christian... who stands in the world in the name of Christ has nothing to offer unless [he] offers to be really and totally present.... The failure of so many ‘professional’ Christians has been that they are ‘not all there.’”⁵

Taizé not only embodies presence toward all strangers who come to worship with the community, but also beyond to far-flung places around the globe. Every year, about a tenth of the brothers go into the world’s slums to live in solidarity with the poor and the outcast. I was amazed to learn that they go not to offer material assistance or suggested solutions to the problems at hand.

When [the] brothers live among the poorest of the poor, that presence is never a revival of the process which involves coming from the Northern hemisphere and bringing our own imported solutions, no matter how valuable they may be.... If we go to these places, it is in order to live a presence with no ulterior motives.... We support local young people who are taking initiatives inspired by their own culture and their own genius.⁶

They witness how their presence can encourage stamina, courage, and ingenuity to overcome formidable challenges.

In perusing the Gospels for examples of those who decidedly stay with Jesus, we find accounts of his chosen disciples following him in close community: observing his healings, listening to Jesus’ teachings, questioning him, being themselves empowered to preach and heal, yet misunderstanding him over and over. Women also stayed with Jesus along the way, “providing for him out of their means” (Luke 8:2), many of whom remained with Jesus as he died on the cross, with Mary Magdalene mentioned in all four gospels. Even the thief on the cross beside Jesus offered consolation as he asked to be remembered in Jesus’ kingdom (Luke 12:42).

A singular Biblical cameo of one who offered presence to Jesus and who stayed with him we find in the story of the Bethany sisters, Martha and Mary in Luke 10: 38-42. Jesus apparently knew the sisters and would find refreshment and rest when he visited them. This time, however, he journeyed toward Jerusalem to die. From the beginning, Martha extends hospitality to Jesus and welcomes him into her home (which was unusual for a woman to possess). As hospitable hostess she sets about to serve her guest, a traditional female role in that time and place. Right away, she seems to be an in-charge person.

Mary also serves Jesus as she sits, enrapt in his words. Perhaps she intuited his oncoming suffering and death, and intentionally stayed with him. She is quickly introduced into the story as Martha’s sister, but in vivid contrast to her. Beginning after the transfiguration in chapter 9 (with its injunction “listen to him” in verse 35), Jesus used the opportunities in his journey to teach along the way and engaged in teaching Mary while she gave him her attention. Mary’s sitting at the feet of a teacher totally overturned the accepted role of women in her environment. Perhaps it is Mary’s defiance of “a woman’s place” that upsets Martha who also felt burdened with the meal

preparation. Surprisingly, instead of going to Mary to ask for help, she goes to her guest to intervene, complaining of doing the work “all... by myself.” Not only that, but she accuses Jesus of being insensitive to her plight with “Don’t you care” that I am in this predicament? So it seems that Jesus, too, is the source of her frustration as she goes further. She instructs him on how to alleviate her plight: “Tell her to help me.” The gospel writer interprets Martha’s actions as “distracted by her many tasks,” and Jesus adds his assessment, “You are worried and distracted (also “anxious and troubled” in the RSV) by many things.”

But Mary, in giving Jesus her full attention, is commended. She has chosen “the better part, which shall not be taken away from her,” inferring I believe that Martha’s animosity toward her will not un-do her sister’s act of presence. In spite of many renditions of the convoluted text in verse 42, it remains that what Mary has chosen, Jesus praises. The word *chosen* I believe is instructive. Mary acted counter-culturally, in the face of a sister’s and culture’s scorn. Mary chose to remain seated in spite of work to be done, which, from some points of view, might be construed as selfish. Perhaps our inclination today would be to jump up to lend a hand! Martha, too, chose to serve but was so overburdened with her choice that she became angry and out of sorts. In spite of her expected role as hostess, she chose to indulge herself with a disgruntled attitude. Could she have chosen instead to lay down her cooking spoon to sit for a little while at Jesus’ feet along with Mary? That’s a hard choice to make when there is work to be done.

Fred Craddock throws in his opinion colorfully:

If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. 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. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan [in the preceding narrative] or Mary, his answer would probably be Yes.⁷

Even though it appears that Jesus rebukes Martha’s attempt to serve him, and even though the church at one time determined that Jesus therefore approved the contemplative life (Mary’s) over against the active life (Martha’s), we can nevertheless glean some insight about being present in the midst of busyness. Today, you and I may come away with differing ideas regarding the Martha-Mary story for us. We might think a simpler meal is needed. Or we need to listen to Jesus more and be attentive to him. Or no matter what we do, a good attitude may be more important than our serving. Looking deeper, the story may help us examine when to go and do, and when to listen and reflect, which involves discernment as Craddock suggests. Living in a Martha world as we do, we tend to involve ourselves more with *doing for* rather than *being with*. As followers of Christ, whether clergy or laity, we are commissioned to serve and to do charitable acts for others. Of course.

I don’t know about you, but my plate overflows day after day with Serving and Doing. With that, though, I often become worried and distracted as Martha, full of stress and dis-ease. Taking time to sit with Jesus to offer my presence may seem just one more thing for my to-do list. Could I possibly erect a shield against distractions and Martha-like vexations in order to rivet my attention on Jesus? Perhaps finding

a quiet place far from the fray may enable any of us intentionally to be with Jesus. Wendell Berry, in the midst of his many chores as farmer, tells how he lets work and concerns go, hinting of sabbaths in his collection of poems by that name:

I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.⁸

In reading the passion narrative of this week, as I walk into Gethsemane with Jesus, will I hear his cry *Stay with me; abide with me?* Holy Week may enable me to hear his penetrative plea on a more personal level, as I try to encourage my tasks to lie in their places. How is it possible to respond and what would my response look like?

Notes

- 1 Jacques Berthier, "Bleibeet Hier," *Chants de Taizé* (Taizé, France 71250: Ateliers de Presses de Taizé, 1991), 6.
- 2 Douglas P. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 301.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 63-64.
- 5 John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religions* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1969), 189.
- 6 Brother Roger, *The Taizé Experience* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 31.
- 7 Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990), 152.
- 8 Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths* (San Francisco: North Point Press), 1087.