

Karen Hollis July 21, 2019 Luke 10:38-42 Centrality of God's Word

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be reflections of your word to us in Christ Jesus.

The pulpit has been central to Christian worship for a very long time. The earliest reference is from 250 CE. Before that time there was little need to give the preacher a platform, because Christian communities were small and they gathered in people's homes. They would eat together, read the Word of God aloud, then someone would interpret the Word; they would pray together and then bless each other out into the world to serve. Does this sound a little bit familiar? When Constantine made Christianity legal, worship moved out of the home and into cathedrals and other places of worship large enough for crowds to gather. In such places, the preacher needed to be seen and heard. Some architects sent preachers into the heavens, up ornate, spiral staircases; others were more modest, but still did the trick. In more modern times, there are stories of itinerant preachers here in North America driving their wagons into towns and then standing in the back of them to preach to the crowds that would inevitably gather. In the beginning, the pulpit was practical – the word is even derived from the Latin word for platform or staging – but in its role, it took on its own theological significance; it was not merely a place from which the preacher could be seen and heard; it evolved to be a symbol in its own right for God's Word in the church. There was a time where I wouldn't have been allowed in this pulpit. For centuries, I wouldn't have been allowed to preach in the church, along with many others. But thanks be to God, it is the centrality of God's Word that remains constant in the church, not who preaches or from where.

The centrality of God's Word was a point of contention in Mary & Martha's house. The sisters lived in a time where physical spaces were defined along gender lines. "The public room was where the men would meet; the kitchen, and other quarters unseen by outsiders, belonged to the women. Only outside, where little children would play, and in the married bedroom, would male and female mix."<sup>1</sup> For Mary to go into the public room and sit at Jesus' feet, she has to boldly disobey the social rules of her culture and behave like a man.<sup>2</sup> Sitting at Jesus' feet doesn't just mean she is drawn to him and is listening intently. One doesn't sit at a teacher's feet unless you want to become a Rabi.<sup>3</sup> Her sister, Martha, evidently not one to challenge the status quo, comes to complain to Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" Translation: 'Jesus, my sister does not know her place . . . Can you help me get her back in the kitchen where she belongs?' Jesus responds: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Translation: 'when the Word of God is in town, speaking in your midst, is it better to keep one's self busy, or stop, sit and listen?' Isn't that shocking to her. As ever, Jesus is unconcerned with social rules; he doesn't care whose rules you have to break. The most important thing is hearing God's Word and learning about God's kingdom. God's Word, the Good News is central, because it changes lives and transforms the world. Jesus made it clear from the very beginning how important it is to sit with God's Word and listen . . . and it has stuck. That practice has been a foundation of the church all these years. But there's a shift happening . . . beginning a few decades ago, I'm not sure how long exactly, preachers started breaking unspoken rules in some places and simply venturing into something new in others by peeking out from behind the pulpit. Today the pulpit stands empty in many United and Anglican churches across the country and in churches all

over North America. While neither the role of preaching in these congregations nor the centrality of God's word have changed, preachers, particularly in smaller churches, have moved down the staircases, closer to where the people are to proclaim the Good News. The Word has moved out from behind the pulpit, roams around, and the people say Yes. It seems the Holy Spirit is up to something; perhaps drawing us back to an earlier time when the Word was shared in intimate gatherings; perhaps preparing us for a way of worship yet to come. Today as we say thank you to our pulpit and release it from the role it has held in our midst, we also affirm the wisdom of the congregation that this is who we are. Jean Rhodes was one of the people who generously donated this pulpit 17 years ago – she has a few words to say.

1 NT Wright,  
Luke for Everyone, p. 130. 2 Ibid 130 3 Ibid, 131.