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## *Words for Ruth Vaught*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler  
at the Eucharist celebrating the life of Ruth Vaught**

We all know that Ruth would rather us not be talking about her today, or on any day, for that matter. So, I want to start by talking about this very familiar story about Jesus coming to see Mary and Martha. Those of you who have attended lots of Episcopal funeral services, or celebrations of life, know that this story is not one of the Bible passages we normally hear at such services.

But I want to use it by way of celebrating Ruth Vaught, because Ruth has given us a much better way to understand Martha and Mary than the way we usually hear. In most interpretations of this story, we hear about how Mary has chosen the better part, and about how listening to Jesus is better than running around hustling and bustling.

But I disagree with that reading of the story. Ruth Vaught, in fact, is an example of how to understand the story of Martha and Mary much better. This gospel story is not saying that listening to Jesus is better than service.

Instead, I propose that this story is about not being distracted. This story is about not being distracted from what God has called you to do. When Martha complained to Jesus that her sister was not helping her, Jesus did not say that listening was better than serving. He simply said, "Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things!"

He said, "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part." I believe by "better part," Jesus meant that Mary was not distracted. She was intent on seeing one thing, not distracted by what other people were doing, not distracted by what other people were not doing. She was single-minded.

In the story, Martha's problem was not that she was serving. It was that she was distracted. She was complaining about others. So, don't let anyone tell you, especially on this day when we celebrate the service of St. Ruth, that service is the lesser part.

Ruth Vaught, St. Ruth, represents Mary in this story, not Martha. She represents Mary, the person who was simply not distracted by her task. She knew what she was called to do, and she persisted, day in and day out, without distraction.

As all of us know, Ruth had lots of things to do in life. She prepared dinner after dinner here at church, and reception after reception. Then, very often, she would return to her home to have still another dinner for some group.

She set up altar guilds for communion, in every chapel of the cathedral, over and over again. And at Lenbrook. And she drove many a parish priest out to home communions. She washed and repaired linens and vestments.

She did everything, but she was never distracted by something else. She loved those many things. She devoured that service.

Now, I have to admit, her loud voice and cheery conversation, and her goofy jokes, were sometimes a distraction to others, if they were trying to pray in one of those chapels before service! But that was their problem, not hers.

In fact, some of y'all may remember that she made it a point of pride NOT to be in church. When I arrived at this cathedral so many years ago, she made a point of advising me that she would not be in church listening to my sermons, and I was not

to be offended by that. She would not be the one listening. She would be the one serving. Her commitment, her call, was to be somewhere else.

She was a saint without distraction, who taught us the holiness of being committed and of paying attention. She stayed on target. She served. In this story of Martha and Mary, Ruth Vaught represents the better part, the person who is not distracted by many things. Ruth is Mary in the story, not Martha.

She insisted that people call her “Old Woman.” And most of us did. But, I must admit, I could never call her that. Something about my own upbringing and my own sense of being a gentleman has been so instilled in me that I could never call her that name. Again, that was not her problem; that was mine.

Today, however, I have still another name for Ruth Vaught, in the kingdom of heaven. She is not Old Woman, but New Woman. On earth, she has carried that beautiful and billowing body long enough. She cared for it the best she could, and many of you here in this cathedral today helped her care for it.

But inside, as St. Paul reminds us in Second Corinthians, a new body was growing all the time. A spiritual body was growing, nourished by amazing commitment and amazing service. That spirit of service was growing daily inside Ruth Vaught, and she was never distracted from it. Now, that spirit of service has overtaken her earthly body and lifted her up to heaven in a spiritual body.

This past week, Ruth Vaught became New Woman. She left her earthly body and grew right into the spiritual one that God has been preparing for her since the day she was born.

Ruth Vaught, we salute you today. We celebrate you. We celebrate your spirit of service, and your spirit of singlemindedness, without distraction. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You continue to be a holy saint in the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, and in the Episcopal Church, and in the world. Old Woman, you are a New Woman, in Christ.

AMEN.