

Sermon for Pentecost 11C

Sunday, July 21, 2019

“The Better Part”

Text: Luke 10:38-42

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

They say that often big things come in small packages, so don't be fooled by the brevity of today's scripture passage from the Gospel of Luke. It's only five verses long, but it has a lot to say to us. At the beginning we encounter Jesus and his disciples traveling, when they need someplace to rest. The text tells us they enter a village and get invited to stay at the house of a woman named Martha who had a sister, Mary. We know from the previous chapter in Luke that they were on their way to Jerusalem, so perhaps this was the home of his dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Can't you just imagine a group of weary travelers gathered in the front room of a friend's, sitting on rugs on a dusty floor, sharing their stories? Jesus starts talking and sharing his words of wisdom, while Mary and Jesus' disciples listen enthusiastically, literally on the edge of their cushions. In the background, though, is Martha, who is running around trying to get things organized for her guests. Now this wouldn't be unusual. You see, it would have been absolutely the proper thing to do for someone to show utmost hospitality to guests that had been invited into the home, much like the lesson from Genesis where Abraham and Sarah baked bread, made cakes, and prepared the calf for the three strangers. That story would have been a precedent for Martha's show of hospitality. But at the same time, Martha's activity seems a bit frenzied, somewhat scatterbrained. Have you ever had so many things that needed to get done that you didn't know just where to begin? And Jesus calls Martha out on it. He says, “You're distracted by many things. Relax. Your graciousness in letting us stay here is enough. Come. Take a break. Let me give you food for your soul.”

Jesus demonstrates the importance of taking a time out, relaxing, taking time to listen to what God has to say. But something else is going on here. Jesus is upsetting the status quo, he is tilling the soil of normalcy. It would be expected for a host to go out of her way to show the utmost hospitality to a guest, but Jesus tells his host to relax, and to dispense with the social custom. This episode in Luke's gospel comes immediately after the telling of the story of the Good Samaritan, which we heard last week, in which Jesus upset the status quo by not only helping a stranger, but by making an enemy—the Samaritan—the hero. And here again, he is upsetting the status quo and inviting those around him into something new, different and lifegiving. Jesus invites his listeners to share in a glimpse of the kingdom of God. Once again, he is challenging the way things are with an example of the way things could be.

There is so much going on in our lives, so many things that distract us, that it is easy for us to be like Martha. I mean just look around. I know many folks probably aren't here today in order to avoid the heat in our un-air-conditioned nave, but despite the weather, think about how many people think they are too busy to spend two hours in church on a Sunday morning. Life itself can also throw things in our path to slow us down: an unexpected illness, a sudden change in plans, a person in need. Life has a way

of throwing us these curve balls, as it were, so that we can step back and enjoy life. There are times when we are to be like Mary, listening attentively for what God might want to say to us—how should we handle a stressful situation, what is his plan for my life. Daily living offers many, many things that stress us out. Wouldn't it be great just to sit and relax at the feet of Jesus, take in his wisdom, and bask in his divinity? We ought to let go of the things that cause us fear, anxiety, worry—the things that scatter our brains—and focus on Jesus. Are you taking time each day to do the Daily Office, or meditate, or spend some quality time just you and God?

On the other hand, it's ok to be Martha, too. It's the Marthas around us that get things done. It's the Marthas that serve on our church committees and in ministry. It's the Marthas that go out and march for equality and justice. It's the Marthas that are the movers and shakers of society. The Marthas are the ones who help spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the world by being the active hands and feet of God. So, being a Martha isn't necessarily a bad thing. Martha of the Gospel story was doing the thing she felt called to do at that moment. Martha was giving of herself from her heart, a genuine outpouring of love, and for Martha, that meant being the perfect host to whomever was blessed to be a guest in her house. The story of the Hospitality of Abraham from our first lesson from Genesis today has that same frenetic pace—and they welcomed angels. Martha's frantic role in this story reminds us that we ought to be welcoming to the stranger, whomever happens to be pleased to be in our midst—whether that's here at church or at home. That message comes on the heels of Jesus's answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" which we heard in the story of the Good Samaritan immediately before today's gospel story. For Martha, her response to such a question was to give all that she had to show hospitality and love. For us, it means reflecting God's love, through Jesus Christ, in how we treat one another. We just might be entertaining an angel.

This brief story about two women who welcomed Jesus into their home is simple in its message, yet quite profound. It's not an either/or message; it's a both/and message. We are to be both like Mary and like Martha. Sometimes we need to be getting our hands dirty, opening our mouths to do God's work; and at other times we need to take time to listen. We are to put forth our best efforts to love our neighbor and bring a glimpse of God's glorious kingdom to the world. All the while, we are to make God the center of our attention, at the heart of all that we do, we should do it as though we are sitting at Jesus's feet, listening attentively as he guides and teaches us. We have need of only one thing, and that is to choose the better part. Whether we are to be like Mary or like Martha, we can still hear the echo of Jesus's command from last week's gospel: "Go and do likewise." Amen.

Resource

"Commentary on Luke 10:38-42" in *The Working Preacher*,
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2917