

Sermon for Pentecost 11C
Sunday, July 18, 2016
“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 might have a lot to say to us. At the beginning we encounter Jesus and his disciples traveling, and apparently they needed someplace to rest. They enter a village and get invited to stay at the house of a woman named Martha. We don't know if Martha is anyone that Jesus or the disciples knew, or maybe she was just a nice lady who met a band of travelers in the marketplace and invited them to stay the night at her home. Can't you just imagine a small group of people gathered in the front room, sitting on rugs on a dusty floor, sharing their life stories? Then 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 too 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, let me offer something to you; let me give you food for your soul."

Now there's more to this story than meets the eye. Jesus seems to be making a virtue out 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

norm. 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 a Samaritan the hero. And again in this story, he is tilling the soil of normalcy and inviting those around him into something new, different and life-giving. Jesus invites his listeners to share in a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

There is so much going on in our lives, so many things that could distract us, that it is easy for us to be like Martha. This weekend, I have had the pleasure of welcoming some friends of mine who are staying with my mother and me. Most of this week, I have felt like Martha—buying a bedroom set, planning to build a foundation for the bed, because the box spring didn't fit up the stairs, cleaning the house, all those things to make my space more comfortable for my guests. But, in the midst of all that, it was important to chill out, relax, allow time to enjoy my friends, enjoy the fellowship and camaraderie. Life can sometimes 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. There are times when we should relax and take in what God has to say to us. With all the things that have been happening in our nation and in the world over the last several weeks—Orlando, Baton Rouge (Louisiana), Falcon Heights (Minnesota), Dallas, Istanbul, Baghdad, and now Nice—with all the distractions, many of us could use a time-out. Many of us would love just to sit and relax at the feet of Jesus, take in his wisdom, and bask in his divinity. It's times like these that we need to let go of the things that cause us fear, anxiety, worry—the things that scatter our brains—and focus on Jesus. It is not Hillary or Donald or police or terrorists or the economy that we proclaim, but rather, we proclaim Christ Jesus, as Paul said in his Letter to the Colossians.

On the other hand, sometimes it's ok to be Martha. It's the Marthas of our lives and the Marthas in the world 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. The Marthas are the ones who help spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the world. So, being a

Martha isn't necessarily a bad thing. Martha was, in reality, 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 pleased to be a guest in her house. 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.

This brief story about two women who welcomed Jesus into their home is simple in its message, and at the same time, profound. It's not an either-or message; it's a both-and message. We are to be both like Mary and like Martha. 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