

9th Sunday after Pentecost
July 17, 2016
Text: Luke 10:38-42 “Mary and Martha”

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our crucified and living Savior.
Amen.

A surface reading of today’s “Mary and Martha” story might easily give the reader the impression that Jesus liked Mary a whole lot better than he liked Martha. After all, while Martha frantically tries to be the perfect hostess – exercising hospitality and attending to every detail, it is Mary who is complimented by Jesus...and all she’s done is sit at his feet and listen to what he has to say. Martha, tired and cranky, was clearly frustrated by Mary’s lack of help in the kitchen, and we’re left wondering how she felt when Jesus told her: “Martha, Martha, you’re fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it - it’s the main course, and won’t be taken from her.”

I’m convinced that even though Jesus told Martha to “get a grip,” he in no way loved Mary any more than he loved Martha. I believe he intended no favoritism whatsoever and that his feelings for each of them ran deep and true. As you well know, there are other stories about these two sisters in John’s gospel. The stories make it quite clear that both Mary and Martha, as well as their brother Lazarus, were very important to Jesus and much loved by him.

So, rather than being a putdown of Martha and a blessing of Mary, today’s story from Luke is really a message to all Christian disciples about the need for balance in life. Rather than simply blessing Mary’s attentiveness to the words of Jesus and condemning Martha’s desire to serve, one extremely useful interpretation of this story would have us look at the need to better discern when to listen and when to serve. **Both are important.**

This is not a new theme in Luke’s Gospel. In Luke 8, verse 21, for example, Jesus says: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

From Luke’s perspective, a good disciple is balanced and knows the importance of both hearing and doing God’s word. **Both are necessary.**

To underscore this point, many scholars talk about today’s “Mary and Martha” story as a companion piece to last week’s “Good Samaritan” story. In the latter, when asked which of the three travelers was a neighbor to the beaten up, half-dead robbery victim, Jesus’ disciples correctly answered that it was the one who showed mercy, the Samaritan of all people. Jesus then said to them, “Go and do likewise!”

You’ll recall that in his sermon last Sunday, Pastoral Intern Paul Eldred passionately proclaimed that for us “going and doing likewise” is a matter of listening to our black brothers and sisters, denouncing violence, standing with law enforcement officers, acting

with compassion, reaching out in specific, intentional ways to show mercy, kindness and support.

This week, in the “Mary and Martha” story, Jesus highlights the other side of the same coin. Mary’s attentiveness to Jesus and her desire to learn what it is that Jesus has to say is commended. Mary deliberately chose to listen to God’s word. To dwell in that word. To rest in that word. It wasn’t that Mary’s act of listening trumped Martha’s attention to being hospitable, but it was clear to Jesus that Martha was distracted and had forgotten why she was doing what she was doing.

Yes, indeed, hearing and doing are each essential facets of discipleship. You can’t have one without the other. Hearing without doing is incomplete. Doing without hearing is hollow.

Candler School of Theology’s Fred Craddock cautions us in this way: “We must not cartoon the scene: Martha up to her eyeballs in soapsuds, Mary pensively on a stool in the den, and Jesus giving scriptural warrant for letting dishes pile high in the sink. 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 or Mary, his answer would probably be ‘Yes’.”

As Methodist theologian William Willimon has said: “Every full Christian life is a rhythm of action and disengagement, involvement and reflection, hard work and quiet receptivity.” And while we bumble our way through this balancing act, Christ invites us to take our time and keep our wits about us.

Now, if I were LISTENING to my sermon rather than GIVING it, I’d tell myself to STOP and end the sermon right here. **But, there’s one more thing I just have to say. So bear with me.**

This story is also a reminder that we are loved not for what we do, but for who we are. It has been argued that what Martha lost in her dutiful efforts at being responsible and hospitable...was herself. “She had forgotten...that ultimately she was valued and loved not because of what she did, but because of who she was. That was not her intent, of course, but in the midst of her frantic concern to care for Jesus, she forgot to remember who she was...a beloved child of God.” (David Lose, Craft of Preaching, July 16, 2013)

Martha, you and I are invited to remember that our worth stems not from our status, our accomplishments, our possessions, our wealth, our jobs or anything like that. What Mary remembered at Jesus’ feet...and this is what we need to remember as well...is that we are God’s children. Beloved for all time. As Philadelphia Seminary President David Lose reminds us, “There is nothing we can do that would earn God’s love and nothing we can do to lose it.” Taken in that light, Jesus’ words to Martha are really an invitation to “come and be refreshed and renewed by God’s word of mercy, grace and love.”

THEREFORE, the LAST thing I want to tell you this morning is this. If I had the time, I would come down from this pulpit right now and look each of you in the eye. I would make the sign of the cross on your forehead. And I would tell you that you are known by God and loved by God for all time and in all seasons. I would tell you that you have meaning, purpose and value in simply being who God has made you to be.

Yes, indeed.

“You are God’s child. Yesterday, today and tomorrow. Let us each give thanks to God who holds us all in the palm of God’s own hands and who walks with us wherever we go, even through the valley of the shadow of death.

NOW I’M DONE! Amen