

Pentecost 6, 2019  
Luke 10:38-42  
Sermon-The Rev. Pat Green  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, NM  
July 21, 2019

This week's gospel is the second of a two-part response to the lawyer's question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Last week we learned that there are two things we must do-love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. We then heard Jesus tell the story of the Good Samaritan which describes what it takes to love our neighbor. Our understanding of neighbor must be radically inclusive-there are no boundaries, every person that we encounter is our neighbor. And we must show mercy. There are no limits to how we may be asked to help. The Lawyer is told to go and do likewise and live.

Today's gospel is a depiction of what it means to love the Lord with all your mind, heart soul and strength. As is often the style of Luke, the author uses pairs of stories to make a point. In the opening chapters of his book, Luke compares the birth stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. In today's reading he juxtaposes the story of the Good Samaritan with the story of Martha and Mary.

Jesus and his disciples are "on the way." This is a term that refers to Jesus moving towards Jerusalem and his crucifixion. It is also used to describe the path of discipleship. The early church was referred to as "The Way." When Jesus sends out the 12 and later the 70, he instructs them to be received into a home in the community and to teach and preach from that home. It is not surprising then that when Jesus comes to the town of Bethany, he is received into the home of Martha and he begins to teach and preach.

Martha opens her home to Jesus. As the householder, she is responsible for showing hospitality to not only her friend, Jesus, but to his whole entourage. 82 people? We are told that she was consumed with many tasks. I think we automatically think of a time when we have entertained guests and our minds go to the house work involved. Getting the food, cooking the food, setting the table, serving the food. But Luke is not that explicit. He uses the Greek word diakonia to describe Martha's activities. His readers would have understood the word as "Christian service." What would we do without our servers in the church, our Marthas and our Marvins? Who would take care of coffee time, set up for worship, and fix the boiler?

Martha intends to honor Jesus. She sets out to prepare a meal, not unlike the meal that Abraham offers to his three visitors in the OT reading today. Soon she is distracted by the

many tasks involved. She is worried. Will the meal get done on time? Will the meat be tough? Will there be enough?

All of this anxiety leads Martha to complain to Jesus, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”

That leads us to Mary. Mary has opened her heart to Jesus. She has seated herself at Jesus’ feet where she can pay close attention to every word he says. The Apostle Paul told his followers that before his conversion on the road to Damascus, he sat at the feet of a famous rabbi, Gamaliel. Sitting at the feet of someone shows that you are a disciple. In that era, women were not permitted to be disciples. Mary’s choice to sit at Jesus’ feet was a counter cultural move on her part.

When I was the Assistant Rector of St. Matthew’s in Parker, Colorado, I was invited to the home of a Pakistani family to do a house blessing. There was a large family gathering. After we concluded the liturgy, a meal was prepared. The women gathered in the kitchen; the men in the living room. Because of my position as priest, I was seated with the men. It felt very strange to me. I would have preferred to be in the kitchen, but their culture required me to converse with the men, it was my time to preach and teach. To be a disciple often takes us out of our comfort zone. Mary probably felt a bit conspicuous, but she was devoted to Jesus and to every word he spoke. She fixed her attention on him.

Martha feels justified in her complaint. She feels overburdened with her hospitality responsibilities. She is frustrated with her sister and she even rebukes Jesus for not caring. I am sure that she expects Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help. Not only was Mary shirking her duties in the kitchen, she was taking liberties that would have embarrassed Martha and the other women present.

Imagine Martha’s surprise, when Jesus responds in a counter cultural way. He not only does not rebuke Mary for neglecting her role, but instead commends Mary for choosing the better part. In response to Martha, he pours out his compassion, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.”

Last week Deacon Jan from Hope in the Desert asked me to write a memorial for my mother to include in their Book of Memorials. The Pergola in their garden was given by my Father in honor of the first Rector and as a memorial to my mother. As I was going back through some of the family memories shared at the time of my mother’s death, I came across the homily given at her service. The preacher compared my mother to Martha. I remember feeling my brother stiffen his posture. He was a little miffed by this characterization. I think he reacted this way because we are often given the impression that Jesus condemned being a Martha and my brother didn’t like that being said about our mother. Later the preacher pointed out that she was also a Mary, sitting right over there on

Sundays listening. She also kept her prayer corner at home where she studied the bible and spent quiet moment with her Lord.

Like my brother, I can't help but feel that Martha gets a bad rap. She was working so hard to be hospitable and desired only to please her guest. Who among us does not have a little Martha streak in us? Our current culture and lifestyle promotes multitasking and busyness. So much so that popular spirituality today takes us to task for being troubled by many things. We are chided to simplify our lives. Books are written with titles like Simple Abundance or Six Weeks to a Simpler Lifestyle to coach us into living more balanced lives.

Is that really what Jesus is trying to teach? Are we to identify with one woman or the other? Martha is an example of the outward active life, the life Jesus commended to the Lawyer in the Good Samaritan story. Mary is an example of the inward contemplative life. Both the active and contemplative are needed. We can compare it to breathing. Both inhaling and exhaling are needed. If we have no time to be still and listen, we end up with empty service. But if all we do is contemplate, we may become so heavenly minded we are of no earthly good. St. Ambrose, 4<sup>th</sup> Century Bishop of Milan, says to choose one over the other creates a false dichotomy.

Instead of pitting one woman against the other and declaring one right and the other wrong, Jesus simply commend what Mary is doing and invites Martha and all of us to choose the better part: the one thing we need which cannot be taken from us.

What exactly is the better part? The one thing? Mary chose opening her heart and listening to every word that Jesus the Messiah spoke. Jesus said, "The words I speak to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). And "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word of God" (Matt 4:4). Mary chose to be immersed in the word of God. St. Ambrose says that Mary has the better part because actions follow being. What we do flows from who we are. When we are disciples of Jesus, immersed in the word, we are transformed into the likeness of Christ, and that cannot be taken from us. It lasts forever. To follow Mary's example, showing our love and devotion to God, we must desire God's word above all else: God's Living Word, Jesus; God's spoken Word in sermons and worship; and God's written word in Holy Scripture.

We don't know how the story ends. Does Martha sit down with the disciples and Mary while Jesus continues his teaching? Or does Martha go back to her busyness. Do they share the meal afterwards? We don't know. What we do know is Jesus invites us, all who are worried and distracted, or calm and centered, to sit and listen. To rest in his presence, to hear his words, to know we are loved, and to be renewed for service.

Go in Peace. Serve the Lord. These are the words we often use to dismiss worship. After sitting and listening to the word of God, we go and do likewise and live.