

Year C
6 Pentecost
Proper 11
Luke 10:38-42

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

This morning, once again we have a familiar gospel story about Jesus that is, perhaps, not as straightforward as it seems. Jesus is visiting and teaching at Martha's house, and her sister Mary sits at his feet to listen, while Martha prepares the meal. Let's look carefully at what's happening here, and see what it might mean for us.

Jesus and his disciples are traveling and teaching, as we've seen over the last several weeks. Today's story comes immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel, and it only appears in Luke—the other gospels don't have this story. We see two unusual things about these two sisters: the first is that this is Martha's house (it doesn't belong to a male relative); second Mary sits at Jesus's feet while he teaches, which is the posture of a disciple (a position that is usually reserved for men). So both of these women are in positions that women do not commonly have in this culture, and which Jesus sanctions. By visiting Martha's house, Jesus implicitly acknowledges her authority in it. By allowing Mary to sit at his feet, he shows that women can be his disciples, as well as men. We will see this kind of openness to women's leadership in the Church again and again as the ministry takes shape.

In writing about this story, biblical commentators have historically said that it illustrates Jesus' preference for the contemplative, rather than the active spiritual life, but the text doesn't really support that interpretation. First of all, it's not Martha's service that Jesus objects to, it's her focus. Notice that she is all about herself: "Lord, do you not care that **my** sister has left **me** to do all the work by **myself**? Tell her then to

help **me.**” Not only is Martha focused on herself, but she is more concerned about getting Jesus to help her with her agenda of getting food on the table than she is about Jesus’s agenda—about what he is teaching. Even though she calls him “Lord,” she doesn’t treat him like one. For instance, instead of quietly approaching her sister, and whispering that she could use some help in the kitchen, she puts Jesus on the spot. It is a huge breach of hospitality to make your guest feel that his arrival is a burden for you. Would you go to your dinner guest, and complain about how much work they’re causing you? Especially if he was your Lord and Saviour? It’s really amazing that she did this.

But Jesus is very good natured about it, and seems even a bit amused. He points out her error very clearly: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” And that’s it; Martha is worried and distracted--frustrated in her service. She’s not focused on her guest, or on what he is saying—which, remember, is all about the nature of reality, and how to live and love. Martha is about **herself**, and **her** agenda. But, says Jesus, Martha needs to refocus “there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” So Mary is paying attention to what’s important—she is listening to the Word. Mary is starting with THE most important thing, by listening to, and internalizing what Jesus is saying. This proper focus will eventually lead to appropriate action, and service of various kinds.

It's easy to get like Martha, though, isn't it? For us, it can be easy to get lost in the urgency and busyness of **doing**. We can be so busy that we forget why, or for whom we are doing anything. Even at church, the pressure of programs and events can sometimes be consuming in a way that makes us lose sight of Jesus. We can be addressing social issues like hunger or injustice, but forgetting that we’re doing all of these things *in Jesus’s name*, and because Jesus *loves* us all. If we’re serving others, but

we're not bringing Jesus into the service, then we are missing the point. Yes, it's good to serve, and we are actually hard-wired to do it. Research shows that people are healthier and have better brain function when they're helping others. But as the Church, we are first following Jesus. That focus then naturally leads to all kinds of service. If we forget that we are serving Christ, then we might as well be any secular non-profit engaged in helping people. But we are not that. We are God's Church. We are gathered here in the service of God, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, as our baptismal covenant says. If we can remember that, and have that as our focus, then, like Mary, we will have "chosen the better part."

Amen

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