

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Kathryn Ballinger, Deacon
Church Year C
Date: 7/17/16
Season: The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 10:38-42

Mary and Martha

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.”

We are witnessing the first encounter between Jesus and the family who will become his closest friends. This house will be a refuge for him when he has to endure the brutal stresses of his later days in Jerusalem, the city of his destiny.

As Jesus and the others enter Bethany, it is the typical Martha we have come to know who welcomes him into her home. As they enter we meet her sister Mary—introvert to Martha’s extrovert. Their relationship is not unloving but they do grate on each other. Martha takes the initiative, showing hospitality to Jesus and makes him feel at home. Hospitality and feeding guests is a very important part of their culture. Normally all the adult women share the responsibility for preparing a meal. Instead Mary chooses to sit quietly at Jesus’ feet, like a student or a disciple would. A role usually reserved for men in that day.

Finally Martha has had all that she can stand. She is frankly tired of doing all the work while Mary just sits and she makes her feelings be known. But instead of hissing at her sister, “Hey Sis, I could use a hand with this, you know,” she doesn’t say anything at all to Mary. Instead she softly reprimands Jesus and tries to get him to tell Mary to get to work. “Lord,

don't you care?" she protests. "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

Poor Martha. I think we have all judged her quite harshly. We see her as bossy, fretting and anxious, somehow less spiritual and devout. The drill sergeant of the kitchen. Perhaps she too would like to be listening to Jesus. But her task, she feels, is to offer hospitality. The least her dear sister might do is to lend her a hand.

At first it appears Jesus is gently scolding Martha and apparently taking Mary's side, that the active life is less important than the contemplative life, that Martha is preoccupied with her trivial chores and has missed the deeper spiritual point. "Martha, Martha, you're fretting about many things. One thing only is there need. Mary has chosen the best part." What is it that Mary chose to do? Very simply, she chose to listen to Jesus. Jesus reminds Martha that there is something more important than providing for his physical needs. Perhaps too, instead of a rebuke, Jesus is offering an invitation. What is more important? Listening to what Jesus has to say. What about serving Jesus? The proper service of Jesus is attention to his words and vision of salvation.

It would be so easy to say here that Jesus approves of the contemplative life over and against the active life. That would be a gross over-simplification. Christian faith and living is never in the abstract. It always takes on an embodied active form. God's love came in the fleshly form of Jesus and got involved in the messy details of our lives. The incarnation means that we find God in the earthy details of life. Martha was not being hospitable in the abstract. It wasn't just trivial busy work. It's the form that love and faith take. Aren't we all a mix of extrovert and introvert,

contemplative and active? And aren't there times in our lives and our spiritual journey when the focus and demands vary and we are called to respond in different ways?

A few years ago, my husband Philip and I took a trip to India. We had planned to listen to the Great Courses CDs on Hinduism before we left, but didn't get to it until our return, which turned out to be better anyway. Hinduism is immensely complicated and we wouldn't have made sense of it until we had been exposed and experienced it.

Our guide was Girish, a very interesting man. Over time we discovered he was deeply spiritual as well. As a youth his one desire was to be a pilot in the Indian Air Force. He was devastated when he couldn't pass the eye exam. He told us you either sink into despair and alcohol or you become spiritual. He began volunteering at a Sikh Temple that for decades had fed 2,000-3,000 people a day in Delhi. Later he graduated from Law School in England, married and had two children. He returned to India so his children would be connected to their Indian culture and heritage.

Girish described the Hindu spiritual journey through life in this way: as a youth your personality is forming and you acquire as much education as you can. You marry and have a family. You work very hard to support your family and parents in their old age. When all these obligations are fulfilled, it is time to become a holy man and seek wisdom. This is not to say one does not have spiritual practices and devotion at all stages of life. But it is a time for deep reflection.

As I get older I find I can't do everything I used to do. Nor do I want to. "Been there, done that," so to speak. I want more quiet time to reflect on my life, to appreciate how God has guided and blessed me with so many

opportunities and relationships. And I have come to know that this is true for many of you as well.

Today's Gospel story comes immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan we heard last Sunday. Out of our deep listening, we are called to love our neighbor. We are called to action and service; to love God above all else, treat every human being as an image of God, like another self, touch sky and sea and earth, God's creation, with reverence and respect as gifts of God. The Good Samaritan illustrates love of neighbor. The story of Mary and Martha illustrates love of God, of sitting at Jesus' feet. The two are intertwined, mixed together. They cannot be neatly separated. You can not tell where one ends and the other begins. We show our love of God by loving our neighbor and the true love of neighbor grows out of our love of God. They're two sides of the same coin.

There is nothing wrong in Martha fixing the food. It is how people show love and care. The Martha's of the world are doing a good thing, a necessary thing. But if we try to do this kind of service apart from the life-giving Word of the gospel, apart from the vision that comes only from God, we will be distracted. It will finally worry us, anger us, exhaust us and beat us down and we will suffer burnout. But with that deep listening to the Word, we can prepare meals for the hungry, care tenderly for the sick, show hospitality to the stranger and keep on loving and living with joy in the name of Christ.

Out of our listening like Mary, we can serve like Martha. Here at St. Thomas we do that with our Thanksgiving dinners, meals and shelter to Congregations for the Homeless, sandwich makers, Neighbors in Need bags, lunches to The Sophia Way. We provide meals when needed and visit the

home-bound and those in the hospital. And Eucharistic Visitors bring the sacraments to those unable to attend church services.

Listening to Jesus was easy enough for Mary and Martha. Jesus was in the same room. But how do we recognize the voice of Jesus? Certainly we hear the words of Christ each Sunday when scripture is proclaimed in Church. But to live the Christian life effectively demands a good deal more. To hear consistently what the Lord is saying to us demands a close personal relationship to Christ, living contact with our Lord.

St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, was convinced that we can experience God's very Self, not simply by reading or hearing about God. He was convinced that such an experience is grace indeed and there is no one to whom it is refused. This direct experience was the key to his life and work. His own experience of God became the basis for his Spiritual Exercises.

There are as many ways to pray as there are people. Prayer, when reduced to its bare bones, is essentially listening and responding. It is listening to a God who speaks in scripture, in daily events, in the movements of the heart, in the community, in the needs of our brothers and sisters, in the signs of the times and responding to what the Lord is asking of us. Prayer is communication in which God takes the initiative and we bring our concerns and we are listeners.

God invites us to settle gently into the silence of His presence, just being with God in the dark and quiet of our souls. It appears as idleness, maybe even a waste of time. Nothing happens. And yet, something that is really important is happening—an encounter with God.

God invites us into the joy of His very presence so we can forget, at least for a little while, all that concerns us, and simply be in the present moment.

In life, what matter is not so much what we are doing but the attentiveness to God's presence, the "eternal now" of our relationship with God and with others.

Prayer and service, like breathing in and breathing out, giving and receiving, all part of the rhythm of being fully human. "Love shows itself in deeds more than words," St. Ignatius said, "contemplatives in action." What we hear from Jesus is that our lives are gathered into God's life, that God is here in the world healing and feeding and restoring, and what we do for others really counts. We are co-creators with God. We can trust God and hope for God's new creation. Amen.