

Pentecost Year C Proper 11

St. Ann's Old Lyme
(Mary and Martha)

In this morning's Gospel lesson, we hear about Jesus's visit to the home of "a woman named Martha ... [who] had a sister named Mary." It is a surprisingly spare account, especially considering that it was authored by Luke who is the most artful and rhetorically gifted of the Gospel-writers.

Luke doesn't exactly pour himself into setting the scene. "Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village." A certain village? That would be Bethany I believe. The same Bethany where Jesus sought refuge after driving the money changers from the Temple; the same Bethany where he sought refuge after riding triumphantly into Jerusalem astride a donkey as the crowd waived palm branches. The same Village of Bethany where Jesus was anointed with costly nard, where Lazarus was raised from the dead, and where, according to Luke, Jesus ascended into heaven. A "certain village" indeed.

Luke is equally laconic when describing the two protagonists in our story. He describes them simply as "a woman named Martha ...[and her] sister named Mary." Missing from the story is the fact that these were not two random women with familiar sounding names. They were two of Jesus's dearest friends.

Like the rest of us, Jesus had good days and bad days. That's part of what it

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means to be fully human, even as he was fully divine. On his bad days, when he was feeling overwhelmed or bereft, Jesus tended to do one of two things. He escaped into the desert or up a mountain to meditate and pray. Or he would head straight for the home of Mary and Martha where he knew he could just *be*. I like to think that he dropped by unannounced, walked straight to the kitchen, opened up the refrigerator, and said “got anything good to eat?”

And so as this morning’s Gospel lesson unfolds, Jesus again shows up at the home of Mary and Martha. He is probably worn out from wrestling with that lawyer last week. The passage is short and sweet, or perhaps short and bittersweet. And it seems to highlight an apparent conflict between serving Christ and being present to Christ.

This Mary-Martha business is dangerous territory for a preacher. People tend to identify with one sister or the other. They take sides. And the worker bees of the world feel unfairly judged – including by Jesus himself. After Martha complains that she has gotten stuck doing all the work, Jesus seems to say that it is her own fault for not appreciating what is truly important in life. Now I have a couple of problems with this response. The first is that Jesus lets himself get drawn into some pretty obvious sibling rivalry. “Don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.” You’d think that someone who could sense danger coming, outwit the Pharisees, and calm an angry mob would

have the good sense to say “Keep me out of it. You guys need to work this out by yourselves. I think I’ll go for a little walk in the garden.” My second problem with Jesus’s response is that he seems to overstate his case a bit when he says “there is need of only one thing,” which is to sit at his feet. This denies what we all know to be true, that the body of Christ cannot function, and the kingdom of God cannot be lived into existence, without a whole lot of Martha-like activity.

But here’s the thing. Ultimately this lesson is not about a conflict between serving Christ and being present to Christ. It is not about practicality versus spirituality. It is first a foremost, a cautionary tale about the dangers of being out of synch, of letting our “doing” and our “being” become disconnected from one another.

Luke doesn’t tell us what Marsha was busy doing, but it is pretty clear that she wasn’t enjoying it very much. She was “worried;” she was “distracted.” I’m guessing that she was rushing around ironing the napkins, fretting over water spots on the glasses, and cutting the crusts off of the canapes. And she gets so caught up in all this that she misses the fact that what Jesus wanted, what Jesus *needed*, was simply to unwind. To be with friends who expected nothing of him other than friendship. A chance to not be “on” for a little while. Jesus could care less whether a fine table had been set. He just wanted a chance to hang out.

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Don't get me wrong; I happen to like a well-appointed table. In fact, in just a few minutes we are all going to gather at a table fit for the king of *glory*. And we're using the *good* silver. But *sometimes*, as with Jesus's visit with Mary and Martha, what is called for is a quart of ice cream and three spoons.

The question this morning's Gospel lesson poses is whether in setting the table, in arranging the flowers, in repairing the air conditioner, in running the stewardship campaign, in calling a new rector, in running the Nearly New Shop, in engaging in mission here and abroad, in seeking and serving Christ in all persons and in all that we do – the question is whether as we serve Christ in whatever ways present themselves to us, we are also making sure that we are spiritually fed.

When our service to God starts to feel like drudgery, when our tasks begin to feel like distractions instead of like labors of love, then something is out of whack. Our service to God should be joyful rather than dutiful. And by "joyful" I do not mean "happy happy." I mean that we should feel "meet and right," to borrow a phrase from the Prayer Book. We should feel righteous, which is very different from "self-righteous." We should feel lifted up ... and gently held.

When I began to feel the call to ordained ministry, or perhaps I should say when I ceased to resist the call to ordained ministry, one of my greatest fears was that I would no longer be able to enjoy worship for myself. That I would be so busy

leading worship that I would lose the opportunity to *experience* worship. This is an occupational hazard for many priests. I have many friends who suffer from spiritual hunger even as they labor to provide spiritual sustenance for others. Well, thanks be to God this has not proved to be a problem for me. I can't let it become a problem. I will cease to be of any use to you, let alone to the God we both serve, if I am not also fed. And so I can guarantee you that at least once or twice each service I will be thrown off stride. Something that is said or done will penetrate into the very depths of my soul. Usually it doesn't get in the way of my being able to do my job, but on occasion I may need to take a second to gather myself and get back on task. So please bear with me.

It happened last Sunday – several moments of special nurture for me. For example, as the lesson from Deuteronomy was being read. To be honest, I wasn't exactly paying attention at first. I was too distracted by all the things I had to do. I was fiddling with the microphone in my pocket, trying to make sure that I remembered how to turn it on and off. I was placing the ribbons "just so" in my fancy leather prayer book. And I was going over in my head where exactly I was supposed to stand when reading the Gospel. But then the following sentences from the book of Deuteronomy broke through all the static, as insistently as a song sparrow who wants to make sure you know that life is good. "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart." "Wow," I thought. "That is so cool!" Actually, I didn't just *think* this. I'm afraid I responded audibly, loudly

enough so that Nancy turned her head to make sure I was o.k.

The second time the Holy Spirit got ahold of me last week was when I stood to read the Gospel. [At 8:30: As I walked up the aisle I took a quick peak at your upturned faces. When I saw the sense of expectancy in them, I was moved, nearly to tears.] [At 10:30: As I followed the cross up the aisle, I was transported by the sound of some truly fine, and truly spirit-filled congregational singing. I did not want the sequence hymn to end.] Then, as I began to intone the words “The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,” I was overwhelmed with the sense that in that very moment I was the luckiest man on planet Earth. I had a couple of other “come to Jesus” moments during the service, but you get the idea.

Let me be clear. The importance of being both Mary and Martha at the same time doesn't just apply to how we serve the church. It applies equally to being the church *in the world*, which is to saying living out our baptismal promises to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons; to strive for justice and peace; and to respect the dignity of every human being. In order to be God's people on mission, we need to experience God at work within ourselves. If we fail to do so, we will soon find ourselves depleted, dispirited, and out of joint.

I'm clearly the new kid on the block. In the days ahead I look forward to getting

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to know you. I will let you unfold in whatever way is comfortable for you. If you want to reinvent yourself and tell me that you used to be a fan dancer or an Olympic athlete, that's fine. I'll try not to look too skeptical. But know *this*. I am eager to learn how your inner Mary and your inner Martha are getting along. How well you are serving Christ AND being nurtured by Christ. This matters greatly because being a faithful Christian, and a faith-filled Christian, is not easy. It is hard work. It has its ups and downs, as does life itself. But living righteously and joyfully becomes a whole lot easier if we make of ourselves habitations where Jesus is pleased to dwell.

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