



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 6 – Proper 11 Year C

The Better Part

[RCL]: Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Some of the most interesting moments in Jesus' ministry happen when he visits his friends Mary and Martha in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. It was Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus that Jesus called out of the tomb and into new life. And it was at a dinner at their house just before Passover that Mary anointed Jesus' feet with a pound of costly perfume. Jesus' fame had spread by then because of the raising of Lazarus. A crowd gathered to see this miraculous healer, and the next day, they shouted "Hosanna!" as he entered Jerusalem and made his way to the Temple.

The visit that we heard about today is only recorded in Luke's Gospel. Martha welcomes Jesus and his disciples into her house with generous hospitality, preparing a meal and serving them. One can imagine that hosting Jesus and his twelve disciples was no small feat — and yet Martha's sister Mary doesn't lift a finger to help. Mary is too enthralled with Jesus' teaching. She sits with the disciples to drink in his wisdom. In fact, she becomes a disciple herself. And Martha makes what seems like a very reasonable request to Jesus, that Mary should come and help with the serving. But instead of sending Mary to help, Jesus lectures Martha about being anxious and distracted.

This is a universal story. Everyone can see themselves in one of the characters: are you Martha – with her worry and fussing and busyness? Or Mary – thirsty for learning, but a bit oblivious to practical matters? Most of us have probably played both roles at one time or another.

What Jesus says to Martha is true, of course: she is anxious and distracted, with supper to get on the table and all the cleaning up afterward. But is Jesus being completely fair to Martha? Or is he momentarily blinkered by a patriarchal culture that made sure that he never had to see the inside of a kitchen? Mary may have chosen the "better part," but without Martha's fussing, there wouldn't have been a dinner table for the disciples to gather around and listen to Jesus' teaching.

The stuff Martha is doing — it certainly needs to get done: cooking the meals and cleaning up the kitchen and so forth. The problem is that Martha wants to be recognized for her hard work — she wants someone to say thank you for once and maybe notice all the thought that went into the menu. Wanting to be

recognized for working behind the scenes is understandable and very human, but in this context, it's the wrong motivation. Doing the support work and expecting to be recognized is usually a recipe for disappointment.

Martha doesn't get the help she wants from Mary or the recognition she wants from Jesus. Instead, Jesus invites her to slow down and go deeper. Busyness may be inevitable, but we can also use distraction as a way to avoid dealing with a problem; we can substitute busyness for real transformation. Maybe Martha didn't really want to sit down and listen to what Jesus was saying. So often, Jesus said things that were challenging or difficult or annoying. Better to bide one's time in the kitchen than have to re-think your opinions about Samaritans or tax-collectors.

Whatever she really wanted, what Martha needed was to just stop. Sit down. Listen. Sometimes, whatever we are doing, even if we're trying to do good, God really needs us to stop. Stop doing so much, stop trying so hard. Stop trying to fix everything. Stop trying to justify yourself by looking busy. Stop doing and start listening. Sit down at Jesus' feet, and try to hear where God's Spirit is moving — in your life and in the world around you.

The world we live in is full of problems, problems we all want to fix. But sometimes we want to fix problems more than we want to understand them. The problems we are facing today don't have easy fixes: how best to protect the environment? How to distribute resources fairly? How to protect ourselves while staying open and welcoming? All of these issues require careful, prayerful discernment — at least, they do if we are going to respond from a place of love and not fear.

Jesus' call is to come more and more into the way of love. But finding love amid the fear that surrounds us takes some work on our part. We have to seek out God's presence. We have to set aside the noise and distractions of the world before we can best hear God's voice.

Where do you hear God's voice? Each of us might answer that differently. If you're having a hard time finding God, go to those places where you know God lives. Come to church, sing the hymns, take communion. Go outside and try to remember how beautiful the sky is, or the ocean, or the trees, or the hills. Say thank you, even if you aren't feeling thankful. Act with love, even if you aren't feeling the love. And love will come to you.

There is another place where we know God lives. John Neafsey, in his book *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, writes that the most important place to hear God's voice is in the cry of the poor. Finding God among the poor is perhaps not as easy as in the beauty of nature or the peace of worship. But finding God among the poor is certain: for we know that God is always alive in the struggle for justice. We know that God lives among the marginalized, that God fights for the poor and upholds the weak. Go and be among the poor, not to fix them, but merely to listen. To abide with one another. To build community. Keep your heart open, and you will hear God's voice there.

Jesus sought out all kinds of people with whom to share his message: tax-collectors, Pharisees, Roman soldiers. Not all of them were poor. But he felt most at home in Mary and Martha's house in Bethany: Bethany, which means "house of affliction." Bethany, which was a leper colony outside the city walls. Bethany, a place for the homeless, the lonely, the destitute. This is where Jesus' closest friends lived, his chosen family. If you want to be his disciple, you will find him there still. Sit at his feet with Mary, and learn how God's love can change the world. Amen.

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