

Proper 11, Year C (RCL)
July 21, 2019
New Song Church
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Genesis 18:1-10a
Psalm 15
Colossians 1: 15-28
Luke 10:38-42

The Better Part

Just when we think we have the formula all worked out, the one easy answer for earning us an A-plus for discipleship, Jesus goes and throws a wrench into the works. Last week we heard the story of the Good Samaritan, where the point was: Go and do. Love is shown in verbs. Right? The Samaritan sees, goes, bandages, lifts, takes, gives, pays, promises.

This week we meet a woman who is doing and doing and doing – and all to exercise the virtue of showing hospitality. But this time, doing doesn't seem to be the key. “Stop and listen” seems to be the right answer. What happened?ⁱ I don't know about you, but this story makes me pretty uncomfortable. Jesus seems too harsh with Martha. The story seems out of character for the Jesus I know and love.

I want to start by looking at that first story of the Samaritan again. I need it, I think, to try to make sense of the story of Mary and Martha that is before us today. Remember why Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan? It was in answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Which rose out of the lawyer's previous question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus tells the lawyer that he already knows the answer—what is written in the law—“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” That is where the lawyer pushes the point and asks for a definition of “neighbor.” As it turns out, the lawyer is surprised to find that being a neighbor is defined by the act of showing mercy to someone in need—not by simply

living nearby, sharing the same social circle, or worshipping at the same house of worship. We learn along with the lawyer that actively loving and caring for our neighbor is one of the ways in which we are called to love God. Jesus tells the man, “Go and do likewise.”

The very next verse of Luke 10 finds Jesus and his disciples continuing their journey and being welcomed into Martha’s home. I’d be willing to bet that Martha would have helped that man left half dead on the roadside, whether it would have been proper for her, as a woman, to do so or not. Martha is a doer—she sees a need and does what needs to be done, whether it is binding up wounds or preparing a meal for a houseful of guests. She is practical, dependable, thoughtful, generous. A gracious hostess. After greeting Jesus at the door and welcoming him into her home, she heads to the kitchen to prepare a meal for her guests. Her sister Mary is there and she also welcomes Jesus, settling into the living room with him, giving him her undivided attention. It seems to me that both sisters show Jesus hospitality, one by her preparations, and one by her presence. And yet it is Mary that Jesus says has chosen the better part.

As preacher Amy Richter notes, “This story can really irk us. And it seems so natural for the story to turn into an exercise in choosing between the two sisters. Whom do we choose, Mary or Martha? Which of the sisters are we most like? Who is more important? More faithful? More valuable?”ⁱⁱ

I find it impossible not to jump to Martha’s defense, because I both understand and value her. And I look out at all of you and I see a whole lot of other Marthas looking back at me. Where would we be, as a mutual ministry congregation, without the Marthas? The Marthas are the ones who act and give and plan and budget and do and shop and cook and teach and preach and set up the chairs and clean the wine stains off of the altar linens and sing in the choir and send out emails and plan agendas and write vestry minutes and clean the toilets and produce reports for the diocese and mow

the lawn and tend the plants and straighten the libraries and fix the computer and choose the hymns and play the music and provide refreshments and clean the drains so that the basement doesn't flood and mop the floor when it does. Lord knows, we need our Marthas! Our existence as a congregation depends on the activity of many, many Marthas.

But I'm not so sure that it was Martha's activity or even Mary's activity (which Martha might deem inactivity) that caused Jesus to say what he said about Mary choosing the better part. I wonder, instead if it was the attitude behind the actions that Jesus found different: openness, focus, and singularity of purpose in Mary and frustration, worry, distraction in Martha. This can happen with any of our ministries, from writing agendas to mowing the lawn.

Here's an example from one of my ministries here: When I serve as the altar minister, which is not nearly as often as our "regulars," Ellyn, and Sharon, and Nancy, sometimes I arrive early, take my time, find pleasure in marking the lectionary books so that they are ready for the readers, emptying the baptismal font and setting out fresh water—smiling as I think of how we will use this water to bless one another during worship, carefully laying out the corporal so that it will unfold neatly with the embroidered cross toward the deacon or priest, arranging the communion vessels on the credence table in preparation for the holy sacrament, filling the cruet with wine, and placing bread on the paten, setting out the oil for the healing minister. I feel as though I am helping prepare for the action of Holy Communion that will follow in the service, in which people will be fed and nourished with the body and blood of Christ. There is a prayerfulness, a peacefulness, and a joy that I find in performing this very behind-the-scenes service of preparing the Table and it feels like an honor—a gift that I am given and that I can give. There is a sense of the holy in my task.

I suspect that others of you feel something similar when you tend the gardens outside. Your work is one of hospitality—of extending a welcome by tending living things—living things that reflect the glory of our God who created them. All the large and small tasks that we all do to keep the doors open, to take care of the building, to contribute to worship, to care for others—we call all of those tasks ministries because they are—they are ways of loving God and others.

But back to my example of altar ministry—it is only sometimes that it feels like a brush with the holy. Other times, I arrive late and find myself rushing about, worried about what I might be forgetting that will become painfully obvious during the service—the oil not in its place, the Gospel book marked incorrectly, or the gluten-free wafers still in the sacristy. And if I also know that I need to be talking to people about worship ministries for the following month, greeting someone who’s just arrived and seems to be looking for me, or searching for a new wick for the candle lighter, the experience is altogether different and is not nearly as fulfilling. On those days, what should feel holy becomes a burden, a chore, a worry. On those days, I lose my focus on serving God and others and instead find myself distracted by too many things on my to-do list and too little time in which to accomplish them all.

Attitude can make all the difference. Has Martha lost sight of her “why”? Is that what Jesus is picking up on? Why is she doing all the things that she is doing to get the meal ready for her guests? Why is any of that important? It is because Jesus is important to her. She loves him. He is her “Why.” I wonder if his gentle rebuke is meant not to imply that her work is of any less value than Mary’s attention but rather to bring Martha back to herself, to bring her back to him, to invite her out of the kitchen and back into community. I hope so.

ⁱ The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter, Sermons that Work, Proper 11, July 20, 2013. Edited JLS.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.