

Sunday July 21st, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost

PRAYER: O God, dispatch to us a prophet! Send us a saint! Give us a healer! Show us a seer! Let them be young, or let them be old; let them sing or dance or speak or remain silent-only let them carry your message. For how precious are your thoughts, O Lord! Your mysteries number more than all the grains of sand and all the blades of grass on earth, yet all of them are one. In one life we have seen them joined together, and once having seen them, we should see them again! Show yourself, Lord that we might sit at your feet and listen to your teaching! Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God of hope and glory, through Christ hear our prayer and renew a right spirit within us. Hostility rages and battles continue; warfare is not ended and lives are lost. We yield to suspicion; our envy creates enemies. We confess that Christ came to create a new order, yet we continue complacently to dwell amid strife. O God, have mercy upon us. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Remember that you are chosen by Christ, who reconciles you to God. Christ presents you holy, blameless, and irreproachable before God. Continue in the faith, remain stable and steadfast, and do not shift from the hope of the gospel, which you heard. For in Christ you are forgiven.

STEWARDSHIP: We lean on the everlasting arms of God's mercy and dwell in the hope of God's grace fulfilled. Whatever good we do we owe to God's power within us. The work of our hands is God's gift. May God continue to nourish our endeavors with his sustaining spirit and accept our offering as fulfillment of his will for our lives?

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Loving Christ, you enter our community, and we receive you into our house. Sometimes, like Mary, we sit at your feet, listening to your teaching; other times, like Martha, we are distracted with much serving, and we complain that the work has been left to us alone. Then you answer us, saying, "You are anxious and troubled about many things, but only one thing is needed." Only one thing is needed. How often we forget, Lord, and how often we doubt, that what you most need is not our waiting upon you, but our waiting for you-waiting for the word, through whom all things are made, and without whom nothing is done. We forget; we doubt, because waiting is not easy for us. We have little patience and much ambition; we have little time and much talk. We fidget in silence. We squirm in idleness. We teach our children that those who say nothing have nothing to say, and that those who hesitate are lost.

O Christ, interrupt our busyness with a word about mindfulness, lest we forget the God who gives us birth. Disrupt our distractedness with a call to attention, lest we forget the Lord who provides for life. Convict us if, when we have eaten and are full, we say in our hearts, "The work of our own hands has satisfied our hunger". Teach us what it means to prepare only our daily bread, and then bless and break that loaf together in your presence, that the one loaf might multiply and feed a thousand, and then a thousand thousands. Convince us, Lord, that one thing is needed for all other things; that waiting for you must come before waiting upon others. Without the word, how shall we know what is to be done, and when, and where, and how! For your word is the why of our deeds; it is the truth of our life!

Sunday July 21st, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost

Many things are needed, and many things shall be. We offer ourselves to you fully, O Christ; we are with you without reservation, without distraction. Speak to us, telling us that all things are possible if only we believe, for all things are possible with God. Call to us, inspiring us to the fullness of faith, for faith is nothing, if not the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. And charge us with the living out of the gospel, for the gospel is nothing, if not the promise of all things being made new, through our God and for our neighbour.

BENEDICTION: Continue steadfastly in the faith, never wavering from the hope of the gospel. Strive with all the energy that God mightily inspires within you, and remember that only one thing is needed: Love the Lord your God with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself.

Sunday July 21st, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 10:38-42
“Better Part”

The seven-year-old boy was watching his mother scramble around in last minute preparations for the impending arrival of her guests. It was a flurry of activity as furniture was dusted, carpets vacuumed and toys and other items were quickly stored away. Then it was off to the bathroom to give it a good scrubbing. The boy was quick to observe how tired his mother was and how frustrated she was with so much preparation to do and so he offered several times to help, which she kindly refused.

This confused the young boy and saddened him somewhat at not being needed. Finally, as the guests arrived, the mother became very upset as she realized she had forgotten to ice the fresh baked cupcakes she had made for the guests. The icing had been made, but she was waiting for the cupcakes to cool before frosting them and had forgotten them. The young lad saw his chance and offered to ice the cupcakes. Mom was so flustered that she relented and left him to ice the cupcakes while she entertained the guests.

The big moment arrived and the young lad brought out the most beautiful display of cupcakes you could ever imagine. The guests remarked how delightful they looked and how professionally they had been iced. The young boy beamed with pride and mother was so happy for the boy’s contribution. The guests enjoyed the cupcakes, so much so, that a second round was required and was offered.

Mother praised her son for his efforts but had a question. “How did you get the icing so smooth on the cupcakes?” she asked. “Oh, that was easy” said the boy. “After putting on the icing I just licked them all smooth.” I bet that was one visit neither the guests nor the host would ever forget. This little story illustrates the universal truth that most, if not all of us, when hosting someone in our homes, want everything to go perfectly.

We want our home to be a positive reflection on us, declaring to our guests that we are: clean, generous, and hospitable. This is true, even when the visit is a surprise. Although when we drop in somewhere unexpectedly, we are certain to hear at least once, “Sorry the place is such a mess. If I’d known you were coming, I’d have tidied up.” Then there are the guests that we dread; people whose presence in our homes is hardly positive.

Maybe they are critical of the food, stay too late, say inappropriate things, snoop through your personal things like in the bathroom medicine cabinet, and generally make the host wish they hadn’t answered the door. Maybe you’ve seen one of the versions of the opening credits of the show *Everybody Loves Raymond*. A scene where Ray’s family is heading over from across the street and Ray and Debra scramble to hide the fact, they are home. They hurriedly lock the front door, turn off the stereo and dive below the window.

This scene just reminds us that there are some people you would just rather never come around. It reminds me of an old proverb about guests that goes, “Bringing a pig into a parlor doesn’t change the pig, but it sure changes the parlor.” Let us simply conclude that having guests, even desired guests, can cause us no shortage of anxiety.

Sunday July 21st, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost

Understanding how we feel about guests, is one reason why I want us to rethink this little story about Martha and Mary. In preparing for this sermon, I read some other approaches to this passage, and generally speaking the writers were very hard on Martha. I even came across one preacher named John Killinger, who in a published sermon described Martha as a “workaholic”. I think that such a conclusion is absolutely ridiculous.

Killinger goes on to say things like, “Martha found work in everything. She wasn’t happy with herself when she wasn’t working.” Then he goes on at length into a psychological exploration as to the reasons people become “workaholics”. It is amazing that Killinger could come up with Martha’s psychological profile out of just four little verses of scripture.

However, I know where Killinger is coming from. I grew up in a church atmosphere where Mary was praised and Martha condemned; where Mary was placed before me as an example to be followed, and Martha one to be avoided. Yet, isn’t it ironic that the same folks who condemn Martha are the same ones who frantically try to earn respectability through effort, even praising hard work.

To come up with such a negative description of Martha, means you have lifted a situation out of a different culture and applied a western viewpoint. How many of us, for most of our Christian lives, have had it ingrained in us that Martha was foolish and Mary was wise? Have you concluded that Mary is some sort of wonderfully insightful person and Martha is a bit of a fuss pot? Let’s try today to set the record straight.

First, let’s set the stage as best we can for what happened here. Jesus has come to a village, probably Bethany, as in John’s gospel that is where these sisters live. Remember that by this point in the gospel, Jesus has become well known, and people were excited at his arrival just about anywhere he went. Martha, who clearly is the head of her own household, and maybe a prominent member of her community, offers Jesus hospitality.

It is Martha’s way of honouring the famous teacher, and to bring honour to their own family, and home. To refuse hospitality was a great affront to the social values in Jesus’ day. Something we will explore a bit next week in Luke 11. To offer hospitality in Jesus’ day was to reflect: the generous nature of the host, the host’s family, and by extension the community in which they resided.

When Jesus accepts Martha’s kind offer, Martha does what any head of a household would do, and she switches into overdrive, making preparations to serve Jesus food and make his, and probably his disciples’, stay comfortable.

Remember, Jesus is a special guest; as Martha’s use of the title “Lord” reveals. Certainly, Jesus deserves the best; it just wouldn’t do to have Jesus report how poor the food or accommodations were at Martha’s house. The shame of such a thing would be difficult for Martha to live down. Remember Martha is referred to as the mistress of the house. Jesus’ care was her responsibility, not Mary’s. Mary was freer, in some ways, from the social obligations that burdened Martha.

Sunday July 21st, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost

Martha was not a workaholic; she was a caring, and careful, head of a household. Remember another experience of Jesus when he was a guest of someone. In Luke 7, Simon the Pharisee was hosting a dinner party, and the unnamed woman came in and washed Jesus' feet with her tears and hair and offered the expensive perfume. The Pharisees present, including the host Simon, criticized her for her brazen actions.

The Pharisees also grumbled about Jesus' level of perceptibility, and moral compass, in stating that Jesus should have known what kind of woman she was. However, if we read on in the story, Jesus turned the whole critique back on Simon; largely in part, because he had failed to be a good host in washing Jesus' feet, anointing him with oil, or even greeting him with a kiss.

So, as you can see, Jesus was not against anyone being a good and considerate host. As head of the household, the invitation was extended by Martha, not Mary; and Martha most likely hoped for some blessing for her and her household from Jesus' visit. I am sure that Martha would have enjoyed the opportunity to simply sit and listen to Jesus, but he had to be fed and cared for, that's what a good host does. Most guests would expect nothing less. The Queen would certainly expect the best.

I don't know, but I suspect that holding the state dinner from a hotdog cart just wouldn't do for the Queen. Now, I also think I see something more in this story about the relationship between these two sisters. Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair." Boy! How many times has a sibling said that? "Not fair!" "You like her better than me!" I don't know, of course, but I suspect this isn't the first time Mary shirked some responsibility. Maybe Martha has had to chase after Mary before, to do some work.

I have heard on more than one occasion that it is very hard for two women to run a household together. It is sometimes why, as a girl becomes a woman, there is friction between her and her mother. Who is the mistress of this home? We also say, "Too many cooks spoil the broth." So, I don't think I am off base by suggesting this has been an ongoing issue for the two sisters.

But Martha sees an opportunity. Actually, as a Pastor this happens to me all the time when I am with a couple or family. I am often asked to arbitrate ongoing irritants between people. Perhaps if Martha gets Jesus to make a judgment against her sister's lack of effort, Martha can resolve this issue once and for all. "Doesn't it seem?" That's a request for an opinion. Jesus, what do you think about this?

Jesus' response is not a condemnation of Martha, or a lack of appreciation for her hospitality. Nor, is it a license for Mary to shirk her responsibilities. Jesus' point is that the most important element of this visit is not: the food, or the dinner arrangements or whether his bed is comfortable. The most important thing is Jesus himself. On this one occasion it is better for Mary to sit and listen than baste the roast.

On most occasions Martha's approach, and her criticism of Mary would be appropriate, but not now, with Jesus in the house.

Sunday July 21st, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost

Martha may desire to be the perfect host, but what she needs on this very special occasion, is to be the perfect disciple. It may be proper service to any other guest to provide your best food and drinks, but with Jesus, the best thing is to be attentive to why he is there and what he has to say.

On this one occasion, Mary's approach is the best, and Martha's misses the boat. Martha just needs to remember who is visiting, and what he can offer her. Martha is not a bad person, nor is she a workaholic; she is just doing what was expected of her in her society and culture. Remember also that Mary's approach was so foreign to Martha. Jesus was a recognized teacher and for a woman to assume the posture of a disciple (I.e. sitting at the teacher's feet) was an unheard-of situation.

In Jewish rabbinical tradition, only boys and men were permitted to learn from a master. So, in Martha's view, Mary was stepping out of her gender role as well. Women, in Jesus' day just didn't do this. The good news is that Jesus welcomes Mary's approach and even encourages Martha to assume the same stance as a disciple. Jesus departs from traditional rabbinical form by welcoming women to learn from him.

Jesus is saying to Martha that there is a time and place for everything. Giving hospitality is a beautiful way of expressing caring to someone. Giving your best to your guests is an act of generosity. Expecting those who reside in the household you lead, to pitch in and help with the work, especially in a hospitality role, is not being unreasonable. But when Jesus is here, everything changes.

Jesus changes everything. Jesus' presence alters social norms, gender roles, priorities and he calls us, when in his presence, to do the same. Sometimes the details are important and need our attention, but when Jesus is here, we need to set it all aside and become the eager disciples at his feet. After all, if Jesus is the guest, do we not want to please our guest?

All of us know someone who really thrives on entertaining guests; someone, who goes to great lengths, to prepare every detail and even spends days, maybe weeks preparing for a big event. My mom is one of these people. She loves to prepare a big meal. I've been at many Christmas, Thanksgiving, and birthday dinners where the dining table practically groans under the weight of all the food.

Lately however, I have taken notice that she has begun new ritual. She now has a food list. Which means that even before every special meal is prepared, and also during its preparation, Mom writes out a list of all the elements of the meal. Then just before we say grace, she hurriedly grabs the list and engages the whole table in a kind of preflight checklist.

Turkey? Check! Potatoes? Check! Rolls? Check! And so on. This ritual has come about because on occasion in the past, a particular item has been left off the table. For example, we have eaten a huge big dinner only for mom to discover she forgot to put out the salad.

Sunday July 21st, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost

And frankly, who wants salad after you're stuffed to the gills and waiting for cake? Mom enjoys this little list ritual, but I also think we who are the guest do as well. It reminds us of how much thought and effort has gone into this gastronomical extravaganza; especially when even the pickles are mentioned.

Yet, despite the variety and effort at preparation, no one misses the point around mother's table that the most important thing isn't on the list. The most important part of the dinner is the guests who sit in hungry expectation. Besides the food ingested, guests partake of stories, jokes, and news about each other's lives. Breaking bread together is the height of social interaction, both in our day and in Jesus' day.

What Martha needed to see was that on this particular occasion, there was the opportunity to indulge in the Bread of Life. The Bread of Life was not something Martha could offer her guests, no matter how hard she might try. It was something she needed to receive herself.

Martha's list may have included baking bread, pouring wine, roasting lamb and setting out some dates, but Jesus is telling her to place another item on her list, one she has missed. In fact, this thing needs to be at the very top of her list and she might as well throw her list of other demands away. "There is really only one thing worth being concerned about" Jesus said.

One thing! How much simpler could life ever be than being concerned with just one thing? No extravagant list, just one thing. So, don't belittle Martha, or heap too much praise on Mary, but let us recognize the value of their experience with Jesus. An experience that reminds us, that when it comes to Jesus being our guest, we always, without exception, receive more than we give.