

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
July 21, 2019
Luke 10:38-42

Love Bids Me Sit

“Tell her to come and help me!”

These words come from the lips of Martha and they are addressed to the guest of honor at an impromptu dinner party of which Martha is the host. (There was a time when I would have said “hostess,” but that word evokes for me a picture of a woman in a long flowing dress with manicured nails, a martini in one hand and a tray of hors d'oeuvres in the other.)

No, Martha is the *host*, which makes her fully responsible for fulfilling all the rules of hospitality incumbent on a householder in the ancient near East. Don't look for her brother Lazarus to take on that role. You won't find him anywhere in Luke's Gospel, or for that matter, in Mark's or Matthew's. Lazarus resides in the Gospel according to John, and there's no way he's going to make it from there to here in time for supper.

So, it's all up to Martha. Have her guests been given a drink of water? Have their feet been washed? Have their heads been anointed with oil? These are not mere customs; they are in themselves sacred acts which recall the welcome Abraham gave to those 3 travelers who turned out to be messengers of God.

The guest of honor at Martha's house is, of course, rabbi Jesus of Galilee whose reputation no doubt precedes him. Luke doesn't say so, but I imagine Jesus has brought along several of his disciples as well. Houses back then were not large. I picture wall-to-wall dinner guests.

And it's all on Martha – the rites of welcome, the seating of her guests, and of course the preparation and serving of the food. She could use another set of hands. In fact, she could use several additional sets of hands – especially those of her sister Mary who has suddenly gone AWOL.

Martha spots Mary as she is handing out the first course, and the sight of her sister sitting at Jesus' feet, bold as you like, like any male disciple – well, it's more than her patience can endure.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me!”

It's at this point in the story that preachers through the centuries have come down hard on Martha, but I'd be surprised if anybody in this house of worship at this very moment blames Martha for her outburst. Certainly not the women present, who have too often been expected to labor quietly behind the scenes while men grab all the glory.

It's easy to read this story as a parable of women's liberation, with Martha trapped in the kitchen by male chauvinist expectations and Mary set free from gender specific roles to take her place at Jesus' feet, a full-fledged disciple.

To read this text this way, however, would be to miss something important about the first hearers of this story.

The fact is, women in the early church had leadership roles that stretched the cultural norms of their day. There is evidence that there were female deacons, even female bishops in those early years. That's before men realized what was happening and initiated a crackdown.

It could even be that the first hearers of this story were gathered in the house of a woman – someone like Lydia, the seller of purple goods, whose hospitality was key to the gospel's spread to the European continent.

Keeping that in mind, Jesus's words to Martha don't seem so quite so harsh. To me, they sound almost endearing: **“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”**

“Worried and distracted by many things” – that has a familiar ring to it, does it not?

Some mornings my finger hovers over the newspaper app on my iPad. Will I open the *New York Times* this morning, or will I sit on the porch for a few more minutes and watch the birds at the feeder? Do I really need to know what the President tweeted at three o'clock in the morning or what new insult was chanted by his acolytes at his latest rally?

Will knowing make me any less worried or distracted?

Emergency rooms are reporting an increase in injuries caused by people walking while texting. In parts of London, light posts have been padded to soften the blow when pedestrians walk into them with their cell phones engaged. There's even a scientific name for the phenomenon; it's called "inattentive blindness."

Is Jesus scolding Martha for inattentive blindness – for trying to win the host of the year award from *Better Housekeeping* magazine? Or is he simply concerned that she has put so much on herself that she cannot accept what he is offering her – *his* presence, *his* undistracted attention.

I don't know about you, but it stabs at my heart when I walk into a restaurant and see the parents of young children sitting at the table with their heads buried in their mobile phones or laptops. Their children are staring off in space, or even worse, playing with their own electronic devices.

There's no conversation. No chatting about the day. No interaction at all. As Jesus says, "**there is need of only one thing**" – for those parents to be fully present with their children.

"Worried and distracted" indeed.

For centuries interpreters have read this story as an allegory about the active life of the Christian as opposed to the contemplative life. Martha is the mere *doer* while Mary is the favored *student*. Read this way, the contemplative life wins out over the life of active service.

John Calvin found this interpretation particularly galling. He pointed out that Jesus doesn't condemn Mary for putting a nice meal on the table. And Jesus isn't taking sides in a sibling quarrel. He's saying to all of us disciples – male and female, ancient and modern: Don't let yourself be distracted by what seems overwhelmingly important at the moment.

Now might be the time to take off your apron and sit for a spell. That's Jesus at the table and he's saving a place for you.

My grandmother's name was Opal Alenia Shive Loveless, but it might as well have been Martha. She was born in 1905, grew up on a farm in West Texas, married a farmer, and spent her whole life nurturing her family and practicing unceasing hospitality.

Opal baked hot bread for every meal. If biscuits weren't on the table, corn bread would be there. She "put up" peaches in the summer, picked wild plumbs to make jelly, shucked corn from the field, drowned cucumbers in vinegar, and fried almost anything you can think of in corn meal, including squash and okra. The butter on the table came from her churn, and you could see her fingerprints left from molding that lump of butter with her hands. If, when the meal was finished, there were no leftovers, Opal would feel deeply embarrassed.

Opal was a pillar of the First Presbyterian Church of Coahoma, and the pastors of that church soon figured out that there was always a place at her table. I remember as a child seeing a dust cloud coming over the hill and down the road toward the farmhouse and hearing my grandfather say, "Oh mercy! Here comes the preacher, and it's just about supper time. Opal, better put out another plate."

Opal died in 1980. I never heard her complain about her life of hospitality, but I'm sure there must have been moments when she felt like giving someone an earful. She knew this story well, and I suspect she thought Martha had good reasons for her outburst.

Benjamin Dueholm is a Lutheran pastor in Wauconda, Illinois. He helped me to see this story not as an allegory pitting doing the word over against hearing the word, or as a tale of sibling rivalry, but rather as a reversal of the roles of guest and host. Martha isn't being criticized for her service. She's being invited to be the guest at a different kind of feast, where Jesus is the host.

That reversal has been expressed in many and various ways through the centuries of the church's life, but one of my favorites is a poem by George Herbert entitled "Love." The choir has sung it many times.

*Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked any thing.*

*A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
 Love said, you shall be he...*

*You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.*

I do enjoy the thought of my grandmother, so long the host, being served by Love as a guest. The same goes for Martha. And if Love has its way, which it will, the same goes for you and me.

Addendum:

The psalm appointed for today is Psalm 52. This text by Doug Gay, set to music by John Bell, was sung by the Choir. (I'm not sure why I bothered preaching another sermon.)

Psalm 52 *sung by the choir* You Cunning Liar, Why Publicize BACA

You cunning liar, why publicize your evil need to harm the good?
Your slanderous tongue is razor-sharp honed to fulfil malicious plans;
You love the lie and hate the truth.

May God rise up to pull you down, uproot and sweep you far away.
Then may the just look on aghast and mock the one who valued wealth,
Who trusted riches more than God.

God, let me like a spreading tree, grow as I trust in your sure love.
Where loyal servants offer praise within your house