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St. Margaret's Church
July 22, 2007
Pentecost VIIIIC, Proper 11 Luke 10:38-42

*May God grant us the courage and the wisdom and the strength
to always seek the truth, come whence it may, cost what it will. AMEN.*

One of the joys of moving to a new church is that none of you have heard any of my previous sermons from other churches. As it turns out, I realized this week that I've preached three times on Luke's story of Mary and Martha. So of course, in trying to save time, I went back to dust one off and share with you this morning in a whole new congregation. But reading old sermons is like reading your diary from years ago. You look back and think, "Who in the world was that person that wrote that?" Unfortunately that happened to me this week. I can't believe I preached those three sermons! Who was I, and what was I thinking? So here goes my fourth attempt at applying our gospel this morning to our daily lives.

I'm sure you're familiar with this story already. You are most likely either a Mary or a Martha. You love to sit and listen and think about things. Or you love to throw a party and take care of the details of life, often struggling to find time to just be still.

Those of us who sympathize with Martha say that Mary obviously let her sister down; Mary should have helped serve Jesus and his disciples and fulfilled her duties as a hostess. If we take Jesus' reprimand seriously, then who would have bought the groceries, cooked the meal, cleaned the house, and washed the dishes? These acts in themselves are all acts of love. Those of us who defend Martha think that Mary is being completely unfair by not upholding her part of the deal, and Jesus doesn't make things any better when he tells Martha that "Mary has chosen the better part."

And then some of us take Mary's side and support her decision to sit at Jesus' feet as a disciple and learn as much as she can from him. He is, after all, her Lord and Savior. The little sibling in all of us wants to know why Martha thought it was her business to ask Jesus to rebuke Mary and tell her what to do. Surely we can all see that Mary did a good thing when she decided to sit down and listen to Jesus, and I think most of us have been in a situation where we have wanted to ask a higher authority to put someone in their rightful place. But what was wrong with Martha's decision to stay in the kitchen? Wasn't she showing her love for her Lord by preparing a meal for him?

And so we have a dilemma. Two faithful women welcome Jesus into their hearts in different ways, one by serving, and another by listening. Yet in some way these two responses of Martha and Mary end up contradicting each other. Why is that?

Well, the meaning of this story would also be incomplete without taking into account last week's gospel lesson of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." The lawyer recites that the law says, "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." Jesus then tells the story of a Samaritan who shows mercy to a man who was a victim of robbers. Jesus tells the lawyer to show mercy in the same manner in order to inherit eternal life.

But in today's gospel, Jesus praises Mary for sitting and listening. "Neither the story of the Good Samaritan nor the story of Mary and Martha is complete without the other." The life of a true disciple requires both of these things: "Go and do," and "sit and listen." Luke has placed these stories side by side where Jesus calls us to actively respond to human need and also to be still and listen for the word of God. Luke does not make a choice between the two, nor are we forced to embrace one and discard the other. Instead we learn from the Good Samaritan how we are to love one another. The story of Mary and Martha teaches us how to love God.

The power of these two examples is multiplied by the characters Jesus uses to illustrate the love of our neighbor and the love of God. Jesus chose a Samaritan and a woman. A Samaritan would have never been considered as a perfect neighbor, and a woman would have never been allowed to sit at the feet of a teacher in the presence of other men. Rabbinic lore quoted in *The Mishnah* says, "Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst . . . [but] talk not much with womankind."ⁱⁱ But Jesus said, "NO!"

There's another story that comes to my mind that might help us this morning, and it comes from Deuteronomy. The Israelites had wandered in the desert for forty years where they were tested with hunger and famine. But the Lord provided manna for them to eat. The Lord showed the Israelites that "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord" (8:3). The manna fell from heaven, the Israelites did not have to work for it, but they did have to gather it every morning. Mary was hungry, but she was hungry for the spiritual food that comes every day from God alone. But just like manna, it too needs to be gathered. We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God. Doing the word flows out of first hearing the word. If we cannot hear the word of God, then we cannot do the word of God.

The word 'burnout' comes to mind here. Many of us in caring professions suffer from this disease – parents, doctors, health care employees, pastors, social workers, therapists, and so forth. We can reach that breaking point of complete exhaustion where we simply cannot care anymore. We come to the point where we no longer have anything left to give. We end up taking longer to get our work done leaving less time for our families. We are tired and leave work without that sense of accomplishment. Anger and anxiety are the final result.

Martha is on the way to burnout. She gets so worried about taking care of Jesus that she ends up taking away from what's important to Mary. In order to avoid burnout, we must take time out from helping others and take time for ourselves. We have to take a break once in a while to just be still and hear the good news. We also have to be willing to let other people help us. This is difficult for us; we don't like to give up control of anything in this day and age.

God gives us these guidelines to take care of ourselves as well. God tells us to be still and know the presence that surrounds us on every side. That manna that gave Israel sustenance fell from heaven. God provided for them, and they didn't have to do anything to get it, but they did have to gather it. So our spiritual food comes each day as a free gift from God, but just like the manna, we have to gather it. We do not live by bread alone, but by every good word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

Even in the church, even here at St. Margarets, we get so caught up in the work that we are doing for God that we forget to simply take time to be with God. Yes, some of us find that simply being still and listening is much more difficult than serving. Some of us are Marys and some of us are Marthas, but inside each of us is an innate need to combine the two within us.

Without sitting and listening to God, our service can only lead to anxiety, anger, and despair, and without doing the word, our faith is meaningless.

The organization of our Eucharistic liturgy reflects the order in which we should pattern our lives. First we listen to the Word of God. We hear the good news. Then we gather around the table and eat to build up our strength to go out into the world to serve out our individual ministries. We sit and listen to discern the voice of God that calls us by our name, whether it is Mary or Martha, to make peace with our neighbors, and God invites us to come to the table to eat one common meal together. The Word comes before the Eucharistic feast for that very reason. Our food does not come from bread alone, but from the word of the Lord.

The word of the Lord is for all of us, in the kitchen or sitting on the floor. The good news is the only thing that we need. The good news always trumps our busy lives. The word of the Lord overcomes all of our distractions. The good news liberates us from our busy lives and frees us from our anxieties and brings relief and peace.

ⁱ *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Volume IX. R. Alan Culpepper.

ⁱⁱ *M.' Abot* 1.4-5. See Herbert Danby, ed. And trans., *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) 446. (found and quoted from NIB cited in endnote i.)