

July 18, 2010

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 10:38-42

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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When faced with the familiar story of Martha and Mary, it is the desire of most preachers, this one included, to explain Jesus' actions, to talk about hospitality, to talk about distractions and how we should know the difference. It is our desire to explain why we should all be good Marys, to avoid being distracted Marthas. This is a good desire and often pans out to be a very nice sermon.

Because it is true, I suppose. You, of course, already know that we live in a time and a place riddled with distractions. Every one of you who will check your Blackberries during the course of this sermon know *exactly* what I am talking about. And the rest of you have a good sense of it, too.

You, of course, don't need this preacher to tell you that we need to look around with more intentionality, to notice Christ within our midst. I don't need to remind you that we Marthas need to put down our potato peelers and dishrags and lose the martyr attitude. We've heard that sermon already, heck, I've preached that sermon already, the one where I remind you to find Christ in your midst and pay closer attention, cut out the distractions and sit at his feet.

But I have not yet heard a sermon about what a crummy dinner guest Jesus was.

I mean it.

Think about it.

Every time he goes somewhere, from the Pharisee's house a few weeks ago to Mary and Martha's house this morning, he is flinging the flaws of his hosts in their faces. It was easy to take when he criticized the Pharisee's lack of warmth; he was, after all a Pharisee, the biblical straw man. We root for Jesus in that one.

The Pharisees wanted Jesus to stick to the law above all else, placing the law above love and above community. I liked hearing Jesus remind the Pharisee that the woman with the costly ointment was doing the right thing, and that eating with tax collectors and sinners is the way of ushering in the Kingdom of God. In light of the Gospel as we know it, the Pharisees were so clearly wrong. Jesus' rudeness to his hosts in that context was, well... justified.

But Martha is not a Pharisee. Martha is one of the good guys. This one stings a little bit. Because Martha and Mary are his friends. And because Martha is so like us. She is working hard. She has a good heart and is doing the right thing. Jesus said, "be like the Samaritan" and "do unto others" and "welcome the

stranger” and “be prepared”. Martha is doing ALL THAT and doing all that for Jesus. Martha is doing her part to usher in the Kingdom of God, just like we’ve been told to. Just like we do.

And yet according to Jesus, she just isn’t right. In her own home, while she is cooking HIS meal, he says this to her. You’re distracted. Cool it.

Why? What is going on here? Didn’t he just say in last week’s Gospel about the good Samaritan that we are supposed to take care of people? And in one a few weeks ago that we are supposed to offer hospitality always?

How in the world are we supposed to get this right if Jesus keeps changing the rules? How in the world are we supposed to know if we’ve chosen the better part?

And the truth is... and this is hard to take... we don’t have all the answers. We don’t know if we have chosen the better part. It is a lot of work keeping up with the least, the lost and the lonely. It is a lot of work loving and feeding, healing and clothing and cleaning. And if we are a community that loves one another, we will also be keeping one another accountable, reminding each other (gently and with love) to keep working to better the world around us, to make it a place that God not only loves but is proud of.

That’s a lot of doing, isn’t it? It is a lot of being the Good Samaritan and the oil-bearing woman and a lot of being Martha, loud-mouthed and passionate and DOer.

But our Gospel reminds us that our Savior is a finicky dinner guest who asks a lot of his hosts. Our Gospel this morning reminds us that we also have to listen, to ask and to be taught. We have to take time to pray, and not just when we need something. We have to be attentive to the world around us, God’s world, sometimes in a way that lets the doing go for a little while. Sometimes we have to say “no” to our checklists, our potato peelers and our mops in order to just sit at the feet of Christ.

This Gospel disrupts our sense of how to “do” Christian out in the world. In the last several years, we have sent teams of youth out into foreign places to be pilgrims. And being pilgrims means just that... being. They are not building houses, they are not taking care of kids. They are not feeding the homeless or doing any of the hands on mission work that we think of when we think of kids on church trips.

They are listening. They are sitting at the feet of Christ and growing in their faith. They are asking important questions and they are learning to be okay without the answers. They are mixing in some Mary to their Martha.

Lucky for the rest of us, All Saints' is exploring how to replicate the pilgrims journey for adults. We'll be figuring out how to offer the same experience to those of us who are so set in our Martha ways that mixing in the Mary might be painful and perhaps even boring. We'll be learning how to be without doing. In the meantime, talk to the youth and see what they learned on their pilgrimages. Come to an adult formation class on a subject you know nothing about. Give yourself the gift of time to listen and just be present to Christ in your life.

When we make the choice to invite Jesus over, we are chancing that we will be challenged. Whether you are a Pharisee, a Samaritan, a Mary or a Martha, chances are pretty good Jesus has a challenge for you. Chances are, he is going to turn your box upside down and point out how you can do better, be better, serve better, love better.

No one ever said that following the Gospel was easy. No one ever claimed that the answers were clear or plain. But there is good news. The good news is that in our trying, in our stumbling and picking up, in our Martha-ing and Mary-ing, we improve. The community grows. The Gospel spreads. The kingdom comes. God's will is done.