Sermon, July 17, 2022

Luke 10: 38-42

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning we heard the story of Mary and Martha, two sisters. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, while Martha was busy with all her household chores. How many of you would say you are a Mary? Who would say you are a Martha? Yes, men, you can pick one of them yourself. Are you always doing something or do you take time out?

At our Bible study on Friday, out of 12 people, the majority said they are a Martha. Very few of us went with Mary. We’ll come back this in a little while.

Jesus and his disciples are on their way at the beginning of this story. Where are they headed? To Jerusalem where Jesus will spend the last days of his life before his crucifixion.

Luke doesn’t tell us the name of the village they entered. In John’s gospel, we learn that Mary and Martha are the sisters of Lazarus. They live in Bethany. Or at least Lazarus did.

When Jesus and his disciples enter this village, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. Already we can ask some questions. Are they in Bethany? Will Lazarus show up in this story? Luke tells us that Martha welcomes them into HER home. The home is not in Lazarus’ name. Did Martha have her own home in another village, apart from Bethany?

It would have been very rare to find a woman owning her own home. Women required men to take care of them and it would be the men who owned the home. They would probably be the husband, but they could also be a brother.

Martha welcomes Jesus and his disciples into her home. It would have quite unorthodox for a woman to welcome a man into her home. It just wasn’t done when there was not a male relative in the house. One sentence into his story, Luke has already raised many eyebrows of his listeners.

Martha is not all alone, however, as her sister, Mary, is there. Where is Mary? Sitting at Jesus feet, listening to what he was saying. Now we have more questions and more raised eyebrows.

All rabbis had followers, termed disciples. These were always men, for only males were educated. A woman’s place was……I paused for the answer at Bible study…..the kitchen! No rabbi would have even considered teaching a woman.

This tradition went on for many years after Jesus’ time. If you saw the Barbra Streisand movie, Yentl, you’ll remember that she wanted to learn from the rabbis. She had to disguise herself as a boy to get into the rabbinic school.

If rabbis taught with their disciples sitting at their feet, they would have been surrounded by men. But where is Mary? Sitting with the other disciples—the men!

Luke is very open about women following Jesus in his gospel. Here is just another place where women are welcomed into his circle. Martha goes against tradition to welcome Jesus and other men into her home. Mary goes against tradition to sit at Jesus’ feet as he teaches. Jesus accepts both in their hospitality and in their inquisitiveness.

But all is not well in the house. Martha is unable to take time to join Mary for she has many tasks to do. If Jesus brings his disciples with him, he showed up with 13 people. Can you imagine someone showing up at your door saying, can you make dinner for 13 more?

Just a few verses before this story, Jesus sends out disciples to various places. How many did he send? 70! Now imagine if 83 people came to your house. No wonder Martha was distracted by many tasks.

So she comes to Jesus. She doesn’t quietly take Mary aside and say something like…get yourself into that kitchen and help me! She addressed Jesus directly about the situation.

Martha starts with a recognition of Jesus’ authority. Lord, do you not care? This is similar to what she says to Jesus as he comes to the burial place of Lazarus. Lord, if you had been here….

If you care about me, look at my sister. She’s left me with all the work. Tell her to help me. Martha’s frustration is directed at Jesus. Jesus is the one who should be in charge, but he is neglecting to get any help for her. He is letting Mary do what she should not be doing, so it’s up to him to get her to do what she should be doing. She orders Jesus, who she has just addressed as Lord, to make her sister help.

Jesus doesn’t turn to Mary, who has certainly heard her sister complaining to Jesus. He doesn’t give her the order to go help Martha.

He instead turns to Martha. He assesses the situation. Martha is indeed distracted and worried about how she is going to get all her work accomplished. That’s very normal, especially when Jesus has shown up with certainly more people than Martha was prepared for.

There is, however, only one thing that is needed at that moment. As Jesus had said earlier in Luke’s gospel, people don’t live by bread alone. They live by the word of God.

Mary made what was seen as a radical, or at least, astonishing choice. She was going to enter the world of the disciples, the men, and take her place at Jesus’ feet. She was going to listen to Jesus while he was present. It was not time for women’s work in the kitchen. That could wait.

Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. He doesn’t say she has chosen the correct part or the only part. She has chosen the better.

Stephen Colbert asks celebrities questions on The Late Show as part of a segment they call the Colbert questionnaire. It’s a series of questions to get to know the person. Questions include what is your favorite sandwich and what is something you should have thrown away long ago.

Stephen asks, “which is better--apples or oranges.” Almost everyone says apples. He usually follows the answer with, that’s right, you can’t put peanut butter on oranges.

It’s not that oranges are bad. It’s just that apples are better. We’re not to throw out the oranges and only eat apples. We can have both. And if you are person who prefers oranges, you can make that your story. Oranges are better, but apples are OK, too. I just can’t imagine peanut butter on an orange.

What Martha was doing was certainly important and necessary. Someone at some point needed to be the hostess and provide for the guests. Someone had to get into the kitchen and serve.

We know that service is a huge part of our lives as Christians. Jesus makes clear that servanthood is a hallmark of the Christian life. Without service, the church could not exist.

In our story of the Good Samaritan last week, we heard about service to others. At the end of the story, Jesus doesn’t tell the lawyer to sit and think about what Jesus said. He tells him….go and do likewise. There is a time for action.

Here Jesus says Mary chooses the better part. It was the better thing to do at that time. She chooses to sit and listen to Jesus. Then inspired and filled with the Spirit, she will be able to go and do, to serve others as Jesus calls her to do.

What she hears will not be taken away from her. The gospel that Jesus preaches and teaches is what will be permanent in her life. While meals and dishes and laundry come and go, the gospel remains.

Now let’s go back and ask the question again. Are you a Martha or a Mary? Perhaps the answer to the question—are you a Mary or a Martha—is YES!

The promise of the gospel is active in each of our texts for today. Abraham and Sarah serve the three men who visit and sit under the trees of Mamre. They repeat the promise of God to them once again. God will provide you both with a son.

Abraham and Sarah have waited long for the promise that they would be the ancestors of many nations. Now as they serve these strangers, they hear the good news that the wheels are turning towards its fulfillment.

Psalm 51 speaks about how those who enter the temple are to behave. It’s a psalm of liturgy, not law. It isn’t meant to exclude those who do not live by the description of an ideal worshiper. It’s meant to encourage those who strive to live the life God wants them to. Those who look to the promise of God as a motivation to live the life God wants them to shall never be overthrown. In other words, it cannot be taken away.

Paul writes to the Colossians that Jesus has first place in everything from creation to the present church. The work of Jesus has reconciled all of creation back to God. Although once separated from God by sin, Jesus now presents us to God as holy and blameless. This is the gospel that Paul preaches and the gospel Paul serves. The Colossians are to have faith in the same gospel.

Some of us are more like Martha. Some of us are more like Mary. Sometimes it’s a bit difficult to live with each other. I was housesitting for a couple who were traveling the country in their motor home. They came home for a few days in a break between road trips.

I don’t think I ever saw Elaine sit down the entire time they were there. Even when I offered to make us dinner one evening so she didn’t have to, she was still bustling around the house. It made me feel a bit guilty about sitting in the family room watching a Phillies game with her husband. She never said anything, but it was kind of uncomfortable.

I can imagine that this was not the first time Martha suggested, many rather strongly that Mary come and help her. But just like Elaine could find something to clean or arrange or occupy her busy hands, taking time to rest and reflect and listen can be just as important to do, if not the better way.

Our earthly work will never be done. When we think of all the ways we believe we should be serving, it can overwhelm us. Jesus reminds Mary and Martha of what cannot be taken away from them.

No matter how many dishes Martha washes nor how many hours Mary spends at Jesus’ feet, the result is the same. Both have heard the gospel and have the hope of glory, ever lasting life with Jesus. It is not the work they do, or don’t do, that matters in the end. It is the relationship that God has encircled them within.

We have heard that same gospel here in this place. It’s shown us the better way. We have been shown the way of Jesus. And that cannot be taken from us. Amen.