

**July 17, 2022**

**The 6th Sunday after Pentecost**

**The Lessons:** Genesis 18:1-10a  
Psalm 27:1-14  
Colossians 1:21-29  
Luke 10:38-42

**The Hymns:** # 901 *Open Now Thy Gates of Beauty*  
# 536 (vs. 1-3) *One Thing's Needful*  
# 917 *Savior, Again to Thy Dear Name We Raise*

**The Collect:** O Lord, grant us the Spirit to hear Your Word and know the one thing needful that by Your Word and Spirit we may live according to Your will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**The Sermon:**

Mary and Martha or Martha and Mary  
Luke 10:38-42

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today's sermon begins with an important question. Is it Mary and Martha or should it be Martha and Mary? Which name should come first? So often we confuse the two names, but it is important to know which name comes first. Mary? Or Martha?

I must begin with a story that you may have heard once before. It's kind of like a parable. If you will, imagine that you are invited to a special dinner at our home, with my wife, Nancy, preparing the exquisite meal. Now, it needs to be clearly stated at the outset that my wife and I have a pretty traditional relationship. That is, we each have certain jobs around the house and when it comes to cooking, she does about 90-95% of the work.

The preparation for this "exquisite dinner" begins on Wednesday, when Nancy begins to think about the meal she will serve. It will be Cornish game hens, with wild rice and a broccoli soup from her mother's recipe, small slender asparagus spears sautéed in brown sugar, a delicious looking strawberry and spinach salad, and to top it off, a slice of cheesecake, not bought from Costco. All of these delicacies are to be purchased on Friday, the day before the sumptuous meal, so all the ingredients are fresh. Saturday morning arrives, and is filled with busy work: the house is immaculately cleaned, upstairs and downstairs. No one will go downstairs, but it, too, is cleaned immaculately. In the meantime, I am outside, working in the flowerbeds in back yard, and cutting the lawn. The garden is finally weedless and looking spectacular. Then on early Saturday afternoon, Nancy dresses the table itself. She finds the right table linens, the napkins, the silver, the goblets, the centerpiece. She cuts the flowers and delights in making the flower arrangements. Late in the afternoon, she prepares herself, bathing, selecting what to wear, curling her hair in front of the mirror. It is now 6:45 and we begin the last minute details. I pour the water into the glasses, select the music or CDs, and find the wine opener. It is 7:00 right on time you arrive and press the doorbell. Nancy and I greet you with grace and calmness, pretending that we always look this way, pretending that our home always looks perfect,

pretending that our garden is always immaculate. And you the guests are pretending too, pretending that you did not have a fight on the way over to our home and you always get along perfectly well with one another. You, the guests, examine our garden and then return to the living room to begin nibbling on the hor'derves that have been prepared for you. And this is where it gets a little bit tense. You begin telling your favorite jokes while nibbling hor'derves in the living room; I am laughing a little too loudly at your jokes; and my wife is in the kitchen straining to hear what is being said, as she is working feverously to finish the meal. We are laughing in the living room and she is working in the kitchen and there is an invisible tension mounting between my wife and myself. She doesn't like doing all the work while we are having all the pleasure of enjoying each other's company in the living room.

You might recognize that this little, somewhat fictional, incident from our home is parallel to the gospel story for today about Mary and Martha. So often, Jesus takes incidents from life and converts them into parables. Jesus takes every day circumstances and transforms them into moments for spiritual truth. He doesn't quote the philosophers of the day or the quotable quotes of the day or the famous Jewish rabbis of his era. Rather, Jesus always finds spiritual truth in the everyday moments of life such as the gospel story for today.

Is the sequence Mary and Martha or Martha and Mary? You need to know the answer to this riddle.

Mary, Martha and their brother, Lazarus, were good friends of Jesus. Jesus visited their home in Bethany often. The little village of Bethany was located two miles from Jerusalem, and according to the Gospel of John, Jesus visited Jerusalem at least six times. We know that Martha owned the home and so we assume that she was the oldest sister. We know that Jesus dearly loved Lazarus. Such deep relationships don't occur in a moment, and this reveals that Jesus had spent much time with this family. We also know that Jesus had become the most famous rabbi in the land; he had become enormously popular and well known. And we know that Jesus, the famous rabbi, was coming to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus for dinner.

And Martha, the oldest, was going to plan and prepare the dinner for Jesus. You can't serve a famous rabbi hot dogs. You can't serve the most renowned rabbi of the land baloney sandwiches. Jesus is coming to dinner and you have to make the meal special. So we can imagine Martha going to market the day before the feast in order to get the freshest food available. She may have found some fresh fish that had been brought in from the Jordan River. And dates and pomegranates and figs and raisins and nuts. And the finest wine that she could find. What a shopping spree that was, and the next morning, Martha was a flurry of activity, busy cleaning the house and the yard before she began to prepare the feast for Jesus, the famous rabbi coming to her house. How exciting. She set the table with her finest, bringing out her brass menorah, the seven-branch candle stick, to make a candle light dinner, and her favorite pottery ware. It was the time of arrival and Jesus knocked on the door, and everyone was so excited to see Jesus. They laughed and chatted and Jesus noticed how clean and prepared the house was, and Martha was pleased. Jesus sat down on a pillow in the front room and started to teach. Being a rabbi and all, he started to talk about God and love and prayer. And soon Martha was out in the kitchen, so busy, so focused on her last minute preparations, and she was irritated that she couldn't hear the conversation between Jesus and her younger sister in the living room. The more Martha worked, the more frustrated she got with her sister, sitting in the living room, cheerfully listening to Jesus. So Martha started to send signals to her sister, banging the pots and pans together so that the

noise would bring her sister into the kitchen. It didn't work. So Martha walked into the living room to serve the hor'derves, the wine, the cheese, the crackers, and as she walked by Mary, she gave Mary the eyeball roll, rolling her eyeballs in the direction of the kitchen. But Mary wasn't looking. Soon, from the kitchen, Martha returned to the living room to pick up the leftovers from the hor'derves, and gave her sister another signal, this one the becoming head motion, indicating the direction of the kitchen. Mary, again, did not respond. She was still focused on Jesus and his words. So Martha finally stood in the kitchen door and her anger could not be contained any longer: "Jesus, would you tell Mary to come into the kitchen and help me with all this work. She is taking advantage of her being the youngest again, so as to get out of doing the work. Would you tell her to come into the kitchen and finish the work for this meal?" Jesus spoke to Martha calmly, "Martha, Martha, don't be so upset. You are busy and distracted with many things. Mary has chosen the better portion, listening to me, and this will not be taken away from her." Martha put her hand on her hips, said "hrumpf," and stomped back into the kitchen to finish the meal."

And thus ends the story and the parable. This story was told over and over again in the early church because it was so down to earth, so ordinary, so common, and that is the way that Jesus' parables always were. Down to earth, ordinary, common incidents from life that could illustrate the spiritual truths of the kingdom of God.

Is it Mary and Martha? Or Martha and Mary? You need to know the meaning of this riddle. What is the meaning of this story?

Martha has become a symbol of action-oriented people, responsible people, men and women who get the job done. And the world needs men and women and boys and girls who get the job done. This is certainly true in the church. How would the church ever survive if not for the Marthas and Marvins who cut the grass, run the altar guild, write the checks, prepare the fellowship meals, and build the church. The church could not exist without the Marthas and Marvins, the men and women who are responsible and do the work. The same is true with the family. We need responsible people to do the work of the house: to cook, to clean, to keep the house operating, to pay the bills, to keep the cars running, not to speak of raising the children and loving the spouse. Households can't survive without Marthas and Marvins. Nor can offices. Nor can schools. Nor can businesses. What is wrong with being a Martha? A Marvin? A responsible, get it done, kind of person?

Nothing. There is nothing wrong with being a responsible, action oriented, get it done kind of person. Jesus did not fault Martha for being responsible. Martha's fault is that she was ... too **busy** to listen ... too distracted to sit at his feet and absorb his presence ... too busy living life to quietly hear what Jesus had to say ... too involved with all her activities and actions that she didn't find time to first listen to the voice of Christ.

And so Jesus taught in an unforgettable way that listening precedes action, that we listen first and then do or act. The answer to the riddle is Mary first and Martha second. It is always in that order. That is true in both human love and Christian discipleship. Listening first and action second. Listening and then doing. Jesus clearly said: be hearers and doers of the word. Jesus never reversed that order; Jesus never said, "Be doers and hearers of the word." From the lips of Jesus, it is always hearers and then doers of the word of God. And this sequence is true for both human love and Christian discipleship.

Martha has become a symbol of the modern world. No, more than that, Martha has become a symbol of you and me when we have become so active and busy with living life that we no longer have time to slowly and quietly listen to God or even our spouse, our kids or friends. In fact, it is a subtle trick that we become so active in doing good things, that our activities become a cover-up for our lack of listening and quiet caring. Martha has become a symbol of a person who is far too busy and has lost the art of listening.

Let me give you some examples. Have you ever come home from a day of work and your kids are talking with you at the kitchen table, and they are saying, “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,” and you nodding affirmatively at their words and thoughts, but you haven’t heard a word that they said. Yes, I think so. Or have you ever come home from a day of work and your spouse wants to share with you what has happened during their day, and he or she goes “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,” and you don’t hear a word or thought that was spoken because you are so preoccupied with what happened during your day? Yes, I think so. Or have you ever been introduced to someone and your mind is racing so fast about everything that you actually don’t hear their name at all, and so you ask their name again, and you hear their name like you had never heard it before? You totally did not hear their name the first time. Have you ever had that experience? I think so. Many of us, in our intense business of life, have lost the art of listening.

The story for today suggests that the first prerequisite for human love and Christian discipleship is listening. Human love begins with listening. Christian discipleship begins with listening. The primary foundation of human love is listening. The primary foundation of Christian discipleship is listening. Listening is the pipeline through which human love and divine love flows.

What is listening? Listening is focusing on the other; it is centering on the other person; it is concentrating on the person before me, giving them my undivided attention. Listening is a gift of self to the other person. Let me illustrate by taking this pair of binoculars here and focusing on the face of Ed in our congregation. Through this pair of binoculars, only Ed’s face is in my point of vision. Nothing in front of her; nothing to the side of him; nothing behind him. Right now, I can only see the face of Ed. That’s how it is with listening. Listening is an art that is learned and slowly developed where you actually focus on that person before you. Not the history of everything that has happened earlier today or before. Not on the future and all the activities that will occur later today or this week. Not on the side about everything that is occurring right now at this moment. Listening focuses on that one person, not on the past, not on the future, not on all the stuff going on right now. Listening is a gift; it is an art; it is a learned behavior that has to be practiced.

And listening is the first face of love. The more one listens, the more love grows. The less one listens, the less love there is. Listening is the conduit, the pipeline, through which love flows and grows.

This is certainly true in marriage. Any good marriage will find a man and woman who have discovered what it means to listen to one another. That is also true in good families. That is also true in good businesses. It is always Mary first and Martha second. It is always listening first and then doing. That is just the way life works.

But the gospel story for today is not primarily concerned about listening to one’s spouse, family, friends or work. The Mary and Martha story is not primarily concerned about human love,

important at that is. The Mary and Martha story is primarily concerned about Christian discipleship and listening to the voice of Jesus. To focus, to center, to concentrate, on Christ and his words and work. By analogy, I take these same binoculars and turn around and focus these binoculars on the Crucifix. The binoculars blot out everything before, behind and around the Crucifix. I am now focused directly and totally on Jesus. And that is what is **vital** to Christian discipleship: listening to Jesus. To blot out all of my past busyness and all the clutter of my mind from yesterday. To blot out all my future busyness and all the clutter of activities that I am going to do this afternoon or night. To blot out all the current distractions of what is going on in the moment. Like Martha, we all get so busy and distracted with living life, so totally preoccupied with living life, that we have lost the art of listening. You know that this is true of your life, and I know it is true of my life. It is an art to listen to the voice of Jesus Christ in a sermon such as right now. It is an art to listen to the voice of Jesus Christ in our prayers when our minds are tempted to run so fast and far away. It is an art to listen to the voice of Christ as we are absorbed in reading the Bible when our minds are tempted to think about other things. Listening is a gift of oneself to the other, a centering, a concentrating of oneself on the other, on Jesus Christ, and listening to his voice. Mary knew how to listen to Christ, and we are encouraged to do the same.

Jesus was coming to dinner at Mary and Martha's house. The most famous rabbi in the land was coming to sit at their table, and even though he was the most famous rabbi of the land, he was their dearest friend. Instantly, Martha's mind went to work and she was soon busy planning the menu, busy cleaning the house, busy weeding the gardens, so distracted and pleased that she was living life to the fullest. The meal was ready and Jesus knocked on the door, and she knew he would be impressed with the meal, impressed with the cleanliness of the house, impressed with the immaculate condition of her gardens. And so they sat down to dinner and Mary remained at the feet of Jesus, listening to him, focusing on him, concentrating on his words and spirit. Jesus was most pleased with Mary's attitudes and he commended her for it. First Mary, then Martha. May it always be that way for us too... In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.