

Pentecost 8C

July 18, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Genesis 18:1—10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15 28

Luke 10:38—42

The story of Jesus' visit to the house of Mary and Martha has endured more than 2000 years of interpretation, analysis, and critical commentary. And much of that has positioned Martha in some rather negative light. People have rushed to judgment with Martha; have been in a hurry to identify her as a “don't-just-sit-there-do-something” sister with a Type-A personality that wouldn't allow her to slow down enough to smell the coffee she was so intent on serving. But in spite of its familiarity, let's just review it quickly and make sure that we're clear on the story:

Jesus arrives in Bethany, a few miles east of Jerusalem at the home of Mary and Martha. It's also the home of their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus later raises from the dead. Jesus is close to this family of siblings. Tradition tells us that when he visited their neighborhood, he usually stayed with them. And so, to coin a phrase, “Jesus is in the house.” And people are showing up to hear him explain the scriptures; there's excitement in the air.

But Luke tells us that there's also frustration brewing. There is tension between Martha and her sister, Mary. Luke tells us that it gets dicey as Mary sits at Jesus' feet—dutifully taking notes on Jesus' teaching, focusing on Jesus the Rabbi and guest while Martha is busy... busy making sure that the entryway is clean, that the guests' coats are hung, that they have a place to put their sandals, that their feet are washed, that the hors d'oeuvres are ready, that the wine is poured, that the candles are lit, that the living room is presentable, that every detail for this important gathering is attended to; a place for everything and everything in its place.

Martha is irritated. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" And this is where it gets super-whiney because, apparently she doesn't wait for Jesus to answer that question before she makes the demand, "Tell her then to help me." But Jesus then speaks the phrase that has lingered in the air for twenty centuries and chases each one of us into this 21st Century: "You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."

Do you ever find yourself so busy that there is no balance? Do you ever want to just slow down, to decompress? Do you ever crave some focus in your life? Have you lost your center? Do you struggle with distractions? I do. What would it take to slow down? What would you need to do? We need to breathe—both in and out.

Mary and Martha are kind of a study in extremes. And rather than thinking that the story is just there to help us be more like one than the other, the story of Mary and Martha is really a story of balance. Martha was at work. There's nothing wrong with good, hard work; we do have to work. Mary was at rest. There's nothing wrong with resting; we need to rest. It's ultimately about balance. Balance is good. Balance is healing. Balance is better.

Martha wasn't a bad person; she didn't do the wrong thing. She isn't the poster child for a Type-A hospitality queen anymore than Mary is a poster child for being a slacker. To be fair, we don't know what Mary did to help launch this gathering and we don't know what Martha didn't do to get things in order. What we do know is that when the teaching moment arrived Jesus simply told Martha that Mary had chosen the "better part." We have two women in this story who loved Jesus, loved their family, and loved the people around them. Theirs was a home full of love for the friends and neighbors who spent a great deal of time there. But in this instance, Jesus simply told Martha that Mary had chosen the "better part."

Jesus uses an interesting word: "better." Jesus didn't say that Mary had chosen the right part, or the correct part or even the only part. He said she had chosen the better part. Better than what? Even that is fairly subjective.

Better to listen to Jesus' teaching while he's in the neighborhood than to be rushing around stuck in the details of hors d'oeuvres and housekeeping. Better to listen than to speak; but then, sometimes it's better to speak than to stuff everything inside. Better to think than to act; but sometimes it's better to act than to not do anything. It's better to work than to loaf; but sometimes it's better to just loaf than to rush around. Better to be cautious than to risk; but sometimes it's better to go out on a limb and take a chance.

So what is better? It seems that when we're in the somewhat vague world of better, we need some guiding principle that is unchanging. It seems to me that the guiding principle is love. When we cut it that way, we find that what is really better is whatever comes from love and leads to love. When love is the guiding principle, we move into a deeper understanding of ourselves and others and God's role for us in our relationships. Love is better.

There is another move for us in this story about Mary and Martha. We're invited to move from "doing" to "being." But our culture has gotten this all messed up. Consider these quotes from some parents:

- "She's not really good at soccer and she doesn't really like it, but all her friends are doing it," reports the mother of a 9-year-old.

- “If I miss a practice, even for a doctor’s appointment, I get benched,” a 13-year-old says.
- “If my son didn’t have an after-school activity every day of the week, he’d sit around eating junk and playing video games,” the father of a 10-year-old says worriedly.
- “I don’t really like lacrosse, but I have to do it because it’ll look good on my college transcript,” a 16-year-old explains.
- “She wants to take gymnastics, art, dance, and cooking, and she goes to afternoon religious school twice a week. I’m not pushing her. She has to eliminate something!” exclaims the mother of a 7-year-old.
- “I don’t have anything scheduled on Sunday afternoons. That’s when I have my life,” a 14-year-old reasons.¹

It’s so easy to just get too busy. It’s a common phrase — most of us have either said it, or had it said to us. What we learn about Martha is that she’s a kind of “don’t-just-sit-there-do-something!” kind of person. But that, being said, then Mary is certainly the opposite; her mantra would be, “Don’t just do something, sit there!”

¹ http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/child_too_busy.html

It seems to me that Jesus might have been trying to communicate that to Martha. To pull a phrase from deep in the Hebrew Scriptures, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”²

Jesus invites us to move to a better way today: To move away from rushing and distractions and doing. In the story from Luke about Mary and Martha, Jesus said that there was a better part in receiving, discovery, and just being.

So today—just for today, just be. There will be time for everything, but today, just be. Just breathe... both in and out. Just stop. Just listen. Just think. Just relax. Just chill. Just love. Just receive. Just discover. Just be.

Please repeat after me the following lines –

Pastor: Be still and know that I am God.

All: Be still and know that I am God.

Pastor: Be still and know.

All: Be still and know.

Pastor: Be still.

All: Be still.

Pastor: Be.

All: Be.

Amen.³

<1,349 words>

² Ecclesiastes 3:1

³ This sermon is adapted from a sermon posted at Changing Church Forum, “Move>>Better!”, July 21-22, 2007. <http://www.cctoolkit.com/tkpdf/toolkit072207.pdf>, downloaded 7/17/2010.