

Sunday, July 17, 2016

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This morning we have the familiar story of Mary and Martha at home. Luke places it immediately after Jesus has taught the parable of the Good Samaritan. A parable where the 'religious people' are condemned for not doing the practical, hospitable thing of helping the man lying injured by the side of the road. The take-away, from that, is as a person of faith you are expected to respond, to act, do something. Then immediately after, we have this reading set in the home of Martha and Mary which seems to teach the very opposite. Martha was busy doing, being a gracious host, while Mary was just sitting and listening. Not being practical or hospitable.

Hospitality is important. It's a hallmark of good etiquette and a sign of graciousness. The entire Gospel of Luke is about hospitality. Jesus and his disciples are welcomed into homes, welcomed to events, they are fed and offered respite as they continue their journey. The Ministry of Jesus, in the gospel of Luke, depended on the generous hospitality of others. But this story of Martha and Mary is highlighted in such a way that it angers some people and confuses others, especially if they identify with one sister over that of the other. Some people look at the story from Martha's point of view. They say that Mary let Martha down: that Mary should have helped Martha serve Jesus and his disciples, that she should have done her share of the work, that she should have been a better hostess. If only Mary had been more like Martha, but then who would have made and served the food? Who would have done the work? Martha's supporters would go on to say that Mary is unfair to Martha, and that Jesus really doesn't help the situation very much by telling Martha that she is too anxious and that Mary has chosen the better part. It sounds like Jesus is saying Mary is the better sibling!

Other people of course look at the story from Mary's point of view. They say that Mary did the right thing when she chose to sit by Jesus and learn from him, that Jesus is, after all, the Lord and that Jesus himself confirms this when he tells Martha that Mary has chosen "the better part."

Two individuals, are portrayed welcoming Jesus. They both respond to his presence one by working for him, serving him by feeding him and his disciples and the other by listening to him and by learning from him. Both responses seem appropriate. They are both faithful responses, yet - as we see - they are responses that seem to end up contradicting each other. Do we practice active hospitality or do sit and listen to the good news of God and maybe get chastised for doing so. So how are we 21st century Christians to hear this story for our time?

Maybe it's as simple as knowing when to extend hospitality and when to receive it. There are times when we should act, and there are times when we should listen and be in the presence of God and/or God's people.

I was recently at an outdoor, DIY, relatively small wedding. I sat down with the bride and groom less than 24 hours before the ceremony and, after the ceremony discussion, the bride began trying to figure out how to get more pie. They had ordered 12 pies, more than enough for the guests they expected. But, the bride felt like there might be a flavor that

they hadn't ordered that a guest might want to try, or what if people wanted to try more than one flavor, or what if there just isn't enough. Could they get someone to pick up the pies, what other flavor should she order, less than 24 hours before a DIY wedding!!! Sure, she could have gotten more pies, but that would have pulled her away from being present to the many family and friends who were helping prepare and put things together for the ceremony. The bride and groom would have been pulled away from receiving hospitality from the people that God had placed in lives to be with them on that day.

Maybe this Gospel isn't about whether we should choose to be worker bees for God or contemplatives for God – that's a false choice. Maybe this is more about being fully present or aware of God acting in the world of how God is present in the ordinary and the extra ordinary. And then because of that awareness, one can better determine is this a moment where I can step way and do all the preparation stuff, the necessary busy stuff, or is this a moment where I should stop and listen. To stop and listen to where God is calling me, or what God is teaching me, or open myself up to how God wants to use me in the moment.

I don't know if the bride ordered more pies for the service. Honestly, I didn't even see the pies. I know that everyone had a wonderful time. I saw her and her husband-to-be enjoying their friends as they hung streamers in the pavilion, and made paper flowers, and watched the little nieces and nephews playing in the park. I saw people being fully present to each other laughing, and talking, having fun - maybe not enough pie, but so much Joy.

When we get so caught up in the task, the busyness of life, the destination, we forget to take in the beauty of the journey. And maybe this is what this Gospel is highlighting for us. The preparation is important, hospitality is important, but not more important than being aware of where God is and what God is doing in the present moment.

Remember Jesus is stopping at Mary and Martha's house on his way to Jerusalem; on his way to the cross. Jesus is making stops on a set journey to sit, to teach, to listen, to love. Jesus is on a mission and still has time to stop and love us in the ways that we need. So God would do no less for us, and this is good news – but not just for us gathered but all of God's people. Our times are troubled. Politically, economically, race, gender and gender identity, class. The problems, at least to me seem so big, and I so small. The work that I and others are doing isn't changing the world fast enough to keep pace with the violence - and I might be tempted to want to be more like Martha and do more and even to yell at those who aren't doing work I think is necessary.

But, it is hard to know which direction to act if we have not taken time to listen. To listen to God and to each other.

I was speaking to some friends who I joined in the late '90's at protest throughout NY regarding police brutality. None of us are out protesting now, I had some guilt around that. I want to be doing something but my priorities at this point mean that activities are strategic and not reactionary. So how to impact that which I see as injustice, how to show love in this turbulent times? Maybe, these are things you struggle with as well. It's the seemingly little, day to day, things that will ultimately make all the difference.

->**Story** my neighbor was upset when we built a fence around our house. We had to cut down a tree, on our property in order for the fence to be put up. We told our neighbors we were doing it. The day the workers came my neighbor ran out of his house and caused a scene. He was arguing with the workers and with me about cutting down the tree. I reminded him that the tree was on our property, and I explained the importance of the fence. After more yelling he walked off in an angry stomp muttering we could do what we wanted.

So I got the workers started and went to my neighbors' house with a peace offering and an invitation to discuss what the problem was.

Turns out the previous owners of our house were not very nice people, and they were experienced as intentionally doing things to negatively impact the neighbors. My neighbor's brother was also in the final days of a terminal illness. He had lived in that house for 40 years and was upset that so many things were changing. Us cutting down that tree triggered stuff that had absolutely nothing to do with our family. And once we, I, took the time to listen to his hurts, he completely understood the need for the fence, and then he saw the opportunity for improvements in his own yard.

We were able to resolve a conflict by recognizing God in each other, by listening to each other. We are great neighbors at this point. What if we could experience all of God's people in this way. How different would the world look?

And so our invitation from Jesus today is to listen to God's word. To extend hospitality and then to act, but to always stop and take time to listen be attentive to God's purpose for us and to experience God's presence. So the story of Mary, Martha, and the Good Samaritan are not stories of either/or but both/and. Stop, be hospitable, listen, and then act. Bottom line: it probably doesn't matter how many pies you have, or who is the better sister/brother, it does matter if you are present - present to God and God's people. Be present, fully present - and the grace of God will inevitably overflow.