

Visiting Friends

I am sure you all have gone to visit friends who live out of town at one time or another in your lives. How were you received? Probably you were greeted with a big smile, a hug, an offer of something to eat and drink, maybe a place to freshen up after your travels. Have you ever been to a friend's house where the friend greets you and then disappears to make an elaborate feast to celebrate your arrival? Maybe some of you have had that experience, and perhaps you were happy for the lull to be able to take the time to just relax and catch your breath after the trip. But eventually, if your host failed to return, you would probably go in search of your host, wouldn't you? Most of my friends would invite me into the kitchen to help them with preparations or just to talk with them while they were busy doing their work, some of the guys might take a look at the latest project or the lawn improvements, if they weren't helping to get the meal ready. What would happen though if you showed up with a dozen more people, as Jesus did in the reading from Luke this morning? Probably the host would leave you to entertain your other friends while making the meal preparations, right?

That is the scene we have when this short vignette of Jesus' life began. Jesus and the disciples stopped by to visit Mary and Martha. No mention of Lazarus here – we have to wait for the Gospel of John for Mary and Martha's brother to make his appearance. Martha greeted Jesus and then seemed to have gone into the kitchen to make meal preparations; perhaps she called out to Mary to get her another jar of water, and hearing no response she looked around and realized that Mary was no longer helping her. Going in search of Mary, we can imagine Martha's annoyance when she came upon Mary seated at Jesus' feet — not helping get the meal ready and behaving like the men behaved in her time sitting at the feet of the teacher, not like the women behaved, preparing the food for a meal.

Being the oldest of six children and having done something like this once or twice in *my* life, I can imagine Martha snapping off something to Mary about getting back to the kitchen. Mary may not have paid any attention, so Martha turned to Jesus to enlist his support in trying to get Mary to behave as Martha thought was proper. I can almost hear myself, "Mom, Mark isn't doing the dishes, he's just

goofing around.” (I have a brother named Mark, not my husband Mark who, of course, I never would nag.) This is Martha’s whiney tattling moment. “Jesus, tell her to come and help me.” It’s not her finest hour. But unlike Mom, Jesus didn’t try order Mary to go help with chores in the kitchen; he reminded Martha that there was only one thing worth being concerned about, and told her to stop worrying.

Scholars and commentators have argued for centuries about whether that one thing meant Martha only needed to make one dish for dinner and not worry about making an elaborate feast, whether it meant she should focus on spiritual things, whether it meant she just needed to stop worrying or whether it meant something else. To make matters more confusing the ancient texts we have for that passage vary. Some say “a few or one thing is needful,” which lends more weight to the food side of the argument while others say the one thing which lends more weight to the spiritual side. Whatever Jesus meant, he told Martha to quit being worried and distracted.

Emma got a book from the library recently called The Hungry Planet; it has pictures and information about families and the way they eat from around the world. The families are typically pictured in their kitchens or where they prepare food surrounded by the food they would eat for a week. Think about what it would look like if you were surrounded by all the food your family ate for a week, including beverages, except tap water, condiments, snacks – the whole nine yards. How many pounds of meat, potatoes, cookies, cans of pop, bottles of milk, loaves of bread, various types of fruits and vegetables would that be? For most of us the variety would be quite large, as would the supply of food, and there were plenty of pictures of abundance in the book. However, one picture struck me. The family from Mali in Africa is pictured with a total of 18 different food items, and that includes salt and cooking oil. Eighteen. The family did not look like they were starving, although no one in the family was obese. Most of us would be surrounded by dozens of different items, they had 18. That picture pointed out to me that we can survive, perhaps even thrive, on far less than we think we can.

I wonder if Martha was trying to put on a feast for her dear Master and his disciples, rather than preparing a simple but nourishing meal? How many of us, when faced with a respected and honored

guest wouldn't try to outdo ourselves in serving a fantastic meal, perhaps shifting the focus from the friend, his comfort and our welcome of him, to an opportunity to display our culinary expertise? Martha did seem to be worried, but not about her guest's comfort and nourishment—that had been pushed to the side. Center-stage was taken up, at least for the moment, not with Jesus, but with Martha's need to get her sister to behave and help her.

Martha and Mary's story comes right after the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Gospel writer we call Luke loved to use paired stories to make his points, he also loved to have a story about men followed up by a story about women. Both of these accounts of Jesus' teachings follow right along after the commissioning of the seventy disciples who were to go out in pairs to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ throughout Israel. We hear a story of the one who tried to limit discipleship to those he knew in the Good Samaritan, and a story about one who tried to limit discipleship to one way of behaving in the story of Martha and Mary. In this scene, as in the scene with the Good Samaritan, we may be tempted to divide the main characters into the good ones and the bad ones, or into those who are better disciples of God's way and those who are worse disciples. Yet, none of us experiences life in separate and isolated episodes. Life is more of a weaving together of events than a cartoon strip with one event following after the other in perfect order. Paired stories in Luke, and other gospels, remind us of those connections and the way we encounter God in the midst and mix of things. Set against each other these two stories force us into a more holistic view of discipleship. We are to love both the Lord our God AND our neighbor as yourself. We are to serve both by learning and reflecting on our faith and by acting out our faith. Discipleship is not an either/or proposition, it is both.

Perhaps Martha is really good at tasks that her society (and ours) viewed as traditionally feminine. Mary may have gifts that are viewed as traditionally masculine in her culture. They each have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit, but they need not have been given the same gifts despite the fact that they are both women and are sister. The Apostle Paul said, "the Spirit allots [gifts] to each one individually as the

Spirit wills" (1 Cor 12:11); therefore, let us celebrate whatever gifts the Spirit has placed in our congregations, in whomever the Spirit places them.”

We all need to recognize one another's gifts and affirm them. Not only other's gifts, but our own as well. There is no sense wishing we had been given different gifts. None of us can afford to snipe at a sister (or brother) who lacks the gifts or opportunities we happen to have either. Encouraging one another to develop whatever gifts God has given, and developing our own gifts and making use of our without worrying about who else is doing what else, is Jesus' message to Martha. Martha is not to worry because her sister is not doing what Martha wants her to do, nor should she worry that she is not doing the right thing, if offering hospitality is one of her gifts. Further, we should be alert to the possibility that God may distribute gifts and opportunities along lines that reach across our human cultural conventions. If we allow Martha to be Martha, and, most importantly, if Martha allows herself to be Martha, then perhaps she can more easily allow Mary to be Mary. If Martha has the gift of hospitality, then she should use that gift to the glory of God, without disapproving of Mary for exercising her own unique gifts. Faith and works are not in conflict. Word and service are not opposites.

“Study and service do not conflict. While it is true that we respond to differing vocations or calls to service, we all need to receive our marching orders before we begin our drills. It is hospitable to ask the guest what food he or she prefers. A team must receive the play from the quarterback before it is run. Otherwise, we are puzzled about what the team is doing, and our efforts to contribute to the goals of the team are vain and frustrating. We become involved in mere busy work...”¹ There was a time when I served faithfully in the church but had not responded to the specific call God had given me. As a result, I wrestled with feelings of envy, frustration, and anger. I was angry that no one else would come to help, but when I stopped and said, “Okay, Lord, what is it that you want me to do, the resentment stopped, and

¹ Mitzi J. Smith, “A Tale of Two Sisters: Am I My Sister's Keeper?” *Journal of Religious Thought*, 69-75, accessed online at <http://web.ebscohost.com> on July 13, 2010, 74.

I was able to listen to God call me into the ministry. We will not be comfortable with the ministry of others until we are comfortable with our own ministry.

Yet finally, Martha's problem is not that she likes to offer hospitality. Nor is it that Mary is not helping her. Both learning from Jesus and serving are necessary activities. Martha's problem, like the Torah scholar who asked the question of Jesus last week, is embedded in her question to Jesus, the same as the lawyer's problem was revealed by his question to Jesus. The problem is that her question is self-centered. Martha said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" In last week's lesson the Torah scholar asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Both questions are focused on the needs, wants, and feelings of the asker of the question, aren't they? Martha in effect said, "I am resentful and a little jealous that I cannot sit and listen, and maybe I don't even think it is proper for a woman to do so, so I want you to relieve my uncomfortable feelings by making my sister do what I want her to do." And she is doubtless worried lest her guests think she is a bad host, doesn't serve the meal on time, doesn't have enough food prepared — probably we have all had those worries ourselves. We know they don't get us anywhere, but still we worry.

We all have our pet worries, don't we? For several years a woman had been having trouble getting to sleep at night because she feared burglars. One night her husband heard a noise in the house, so he went downstairs to investigate. When he got there, he did find a burglar. "Good evening," said the man of the house. "I am pleased to see you. Come upstairs and meet my wife. She has been waiting 10 years to meet you."²

Our worry will not help us to focus on the one thing there is need of. Martha had taken the point of her service to Jesus out of the center of her life and replaced it with worry. Jesus reminded her to get her attention back where it belonged. But I think that Martha also represented the Good Samaritan in this story — the one who sees to the needs of the guests and is responding to them. And she represented the

² William Marshall, *Eternity Shut in a Span*.

one who just didn't quite "get it" either. Like the lawyer whose question prompted the parable of the Good Samaritan, she answered properly. Yet both Martha and the Torah Scholar then turn the discussion back to their own needs, the lawyer wanting to have a well-defined circle of neighbors, and Martha wanting defined roles, they turn the focus back to themselves, taking the love of God out of the spotlight.

Just as Jesus did with the lawyer, he does with Martha. He does not absorb her anxiety and transmit it to Mary, he remains a non-anxious presence. He does not scold her so much as remind her that there is one needful thing. He reminds Martha that Mary cannot fix her problem, and Jesus cannot fix her problem, only she can. Her problem was that she was distracted by all the preparations. She only needed to focus on one thing. Scholars argue, as I said earlier, over whether this meant that she only needed to provide one dish for her guests or whether Jesus was pointing to the one spiritual lesson – focus on Jesus and the rest will follow. It does not probably matter in the end. Jesus is telling her the problem is that she is distracted by worries. She should focus on her own gifts and the path she has chosen, she doesn't need to cook the most elaborate meal ever simply to earn the reputation of being the best hostess in town. Henri Nouwen stated that "hospitality as a healing power" requires that the "host feel at home in his[or her] own house."³ Then, and only then, can we create a comfortable environment for the visitor and other persons who are in our midst. I like to believe that if Martha offered hospitality not for her own glory, but for the comfort of her guests, then she would indeed have had time also to sit at Jesus' feet able to enjoy simply being with him, learning from his discussion.

How is the church today working to carry out this ministry of hospitality? Are we so focused on the task at hand that the coffee cup, for an example, gets whisked away before the guest has a chance to finish the drink? Are we so overburdened that the work we do for the church becomes a chore, and we forget that this is a community formed to usher in God's reign on earth? Are we focusing on what others are not doing rather than what we have been called to do? Are we carrying out tasks, but not carrying out our call to place God at the center of our service? If we miss this one needful think, then we should not be

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 89.

surprised when tasks go undone, when the pews seem emptier, when the life and energy seems to have disappeared from the congregation. When we focus our efforts on service to God, nurturing our faith, and seeking to serve through the use of the gifts we have been given, then the good news and joy will resound throughout the building, and throughout our lives.

“If we were to ask Jesus which applies to us, Lord, the Samaritan or Mary, Jesus would probably have said, “Yes.” Doing and being are not two opposing forces, but rather one is the outgrowth of the other. As we are shaped by God and given the gifts we have been given, as we learn and grow in our faith, we will be called to do the work that God has for us to do. With the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to see that when we are centered in the Lord, and have removed ourselves from the center, then we will be able to achieve that balance and wholeness in life that is called shalom. Shalom is right relationship with God. Shalom is not looking to the world for fulfillment and wholeness, but rather looking to the God, the life-giver, the peacemaker, the source of shalom.”⁴

“A spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are all anchored in God...”⁵

As the old hymn said, “Jesus calls us o’er the tumult of our life’s wild restless seas.

Day by day his sweet voice calls us, saying Christians follow me.”

When we follow Jesus, our lives will be filled with time for both action and reflection, for being and doing. Let us give up our worrying, get ourselves and our worries out of the central place in our lives and follow Jesus, as we have been given the gifts to do so through the love of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ *Seasons of the Spirit*, July 18, 2010.

⁵ Evelyn Underhill

Pastoral Prayer

God Almighty, you who ask us to trust only in you, we pray that we can put aside our busyness for a time and allow reflection on Jesus' words to inform our actions of faith. May your Spirit guide us in our busyness – the expectations of community, the needs of others, the necessary demands of our lives and ministries – help us to let them be for a while. Move us deeper into your presence where we can be fully attentive to the depth of Jesus' teaching, the stirring of your spirit, the gift of your listening. May we create space within our lives to meet you, O God, and to know you more.

Benediction

May the presence of Spirit be a strength in you calling you, holding you, shaping you.

And may you find your home close to God, always with an ear to the world waiting for your return.

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