

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 17, 2022

The scriptures we'll hear in these Sundays after Pentecost strike a note of urgency—the telling of certain parables and unfolding of events we hear in the Gospel readings all happen on the way to Jerusalem. Last week we heard a story that was about more than knowing the right things...it was about doing them. Today we'll try to make some sense of Martha's doing while Mary's sits to learn. Spoiler alert; both learning and serving are needed in the church as we minister to the world God loves.

Luke 10:38-42

38Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

It's not like Mary's binge watching Tic Tok videos while Martha chops vegetables. Nor is it that Martha is just too busy. This scene is not a parable either. So what's happening here?

Some clarity and a richer viewpoint comes from a commentary by Pastor Niveen Sarras offered on the Working Preacher website. Impressive that her Phd is in Hebrew Bible. More compelling is that she grew up in Bethlehem, Palestine—Much of what follows here is shaped by Pastor Sarras' perspective as a woman from Palestine. She invites us to study the scene and then look beyond it.

Pastor Sarras remembers her own family and culture where meals and hospitality take on deep significance. Guests are welcomed, protected, and cared for regardless of cost to the host. Martha undertakes many of the tasks traditionally carried out by women. Luke shocks us a bit with the detail that Martha, not the oldest man in residence, is the head of household. Martha's role is central— not peripheral to ensure all guests are treated with care and respect. She also thinks it would be nice if Mary would step up to help.

Mary for her part is sitting with the men— listening to Jesus teach. It was rare that a woman sat with the men and received the same teaching. So Luke startles us and this jolt is more jarring than the first.

Martha stretches the boundaries of her culture and Mary steps right through them. Here's where Pastor Sarras holds up a hand to slow us from cheering too loudly about Jesus being a feminist (Ok I like to think he is). That notion wouldn't make any sense in his culture and time. What IS at work here is a glimpse of what God's realm looks like. —Access to Jesus and his teachings is open for everyone. Luke paints this tableau hoping we'll be shocked out of our fixed categories of thinking into imagining God's ways as far more expansive than we've previously thought.

The people who were part of house churches in the first century would know the story of Martha and Mary. They also would feel the pull of two important values that seem at times to oppose each other. In both the prequel (Luke) and the sequel (Acts) we experience the tension between hearing and proclaiming the word on the one hand and on the other hand doing the word by...serving . One commentary I saw highlighted the word we use for "deacons" the word used to describe Martha's ministry. It's the same word describing the food sharing and medical relief house churches provided to widows and orphans. In the early church one of the first dilemmas they faced was the overwhelming need and a sense they weren't able to learn Jesus' teaching.

Pastor Sarass suggests that the disciple community has some unlearning to do...we are served first or taught first and then serve. Or at least our service has as its starting place the things we're taught. She illustrates the point by reminding us that in our denomination, deacons are ordained to word and service...their study begins with a steeping in word and then field experience in serving.

The learning and then serving sequence might be a bit like breathing... inhale- exhale-repeat. Try doing one without the other for more than a few seconds. —one relies on the other.

Life starts with God breathing into us and Spirit breathing through us. Remember Jesus' words in John's Gospel to his followers? God would send the Holy Spirit to teach and remind us of all that Jesus was about. So in that way we are like Mary and we sit at Jesus' feet and we're being formed into a people who listen and as people who serve. May it be so among us.