

Grace and peace to you from God the Father, and Jesus, our Lord and Savior.
Amen.

Last week our lesson was the story of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan showed his love for his neighbor by taking an active role and helping—thus honoring the love relationship of one person for another. Jesus says go and do. In today's lesson Mary shows her love for the Lord by listening to him—thus honoring the love relationship of a person for God. Here Jesus says, "Come and sit."

From Brother Lawrence in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, we read: *The most holy practice, the nearest to daily life, and the most essential for the spiritual life, is the practice of the presence of God, that is to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him at all times every moment, without rule or restriction, above all at times of temptation, distress, dryness, and revulsion, and even of faithlessness and sin.*

OK—looking at today's story--What part of daily life could be more common than dinner-- a meal? Hospitality is exceedingly important in the biblical world in general and in Luke's Gospel in particular. When Jesus comes to Bethany, Martha demonstrates hospitality by welcoming Jesus into the home she shares with her sister Mary. She then busies herself with the tasks of serving their guest. Although we are not told precisely what those tasks are, a good guess is that she began preparing a meal.

Meanwhile her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to his words. Rather than assuming the role expected of women in her culture, she takes her place at the feet of Jesus. She assumes the posture of a student learning at the feet of a rabbi, a role traditionally reserved for men.

This pleasant story takes a sharp turn when Martha, distracted by her many tasks, comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me". Many who read or hear this story may cheer for Mary in her inversion of traditional roles. Many may also empathize with Martha's resentment of her sister for leaving her to do all the work. Jesus' response to Martha seems less than empathetic, chiding her for her distraction and worry, and praising Mary: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.* Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her".

The problem with Martha is not that she is busy serving and providing hospitality. Certainly, Jesus commends this kind of service to the neighbor many times, notably in the parable of the Good Samaritan that we heard last week. The problem with Martha is not her serving, but rather that she is worried and

distracted. The word translated “distracted” in verse 40, has the connotation of being pulled or dragged in different directions.

Martha’s distraction and worry leave no room for the most important aspect of hospitality — gracious attention to the guest. In fact, she breaks all the rules of hospitality by trying to embarrass her sister in front of her guest, and by asking her guest to intervene in a family dispute. She even goes so far as to accuse Jesus of not caring about her (*Lord, do you not care...?*).

Martha’s worry and distraction prevent her from being truly present with Jesus, and cause her to drive a wedge between her sister and herself, and between Jesus and herself. She has missed out on the “one thing needed” for true hospitality. There is no greater hospitality than listening to your guest. How much more so when the guest is Jesus! So Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

In our culture of hectic schedules and the relentless pursuit of productivity, we are tempted to measure our worth by how busy we are, by how much we accomplish, or by how well we meet the expectations of others. Many people likely identify with Martha. Feeling pulled in different directions, feeling worried and distracted by many things — these seem to be common threads of life in our fast-paced world. And yet, as Jesus says in Luke 12:25, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” We know that worrying does no good, and that much of what we worry about is not so important in the larger scheme of things, and yet we cannot seem to quell our anxious thoughts and frantic activity.

It is true that much of our busyness and distraction stems from the noblest of intentions. We want to provide for our families, we want to give our children every opportunity to enrich their lives, we want to serve our neighbors, and yes, we want to serve the Lord. Indeed, where would the church be without its “Marthas,” those faithful folk who perform the tasks of hospitality and service so vital to making the church a welcoming and well-functioning community?

And yet if all our activities leave us with no time to be still in the Lord’s presence and hear God’s word, we are likely to end up anxious and troubled. We are likely to end up with a kind of service that is devoid of love and joy and may even be resentful of others.

Both listening and doing, receiving God’s Word and serving others, are vital to the Christian life. Trying to serve without being nourished by God’s word is like expecting good fruit to grow from a tree that has been uprooted. Luke’s story is left suspended. We do not know what happened next — whether Mary and Martha were reconciled, whether they were all able to enjoy the meal that Martha had prepared, whether Martha was finally able to sit and give her full attention to Jesus.

We do know that Jesus invites all of us who are worried and distracted by many things to sit and rest in his presence, to hear his words of grace and truth, to know that we are loved and valued as children of God, to be renewed in faith and strengthened for service. There is need of only one thing: attention to our guest. As it turns out, our guest is also our host, with abundant gifts to give.

If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, "Are we to be like Mary or like the good Samaritan?" His answer would probably be "Yes." There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which is a matter of spiritual discernment.

Again, listen to the words of Brother Lawrence

The most holy practice, the nearest to daily life, and the most essential for the spiritual life, is the practice of the presence of God, that is to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life.

And so today I say you –

You have chosen correctly.

You are here in the house of God.

You have given God your time, your praise, your gifts.

Come now, as we gather in Holy Communion, the feast of our Lord—the main course.

The food that restores our heart and mind and soul.

Amen.
