

9th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 17/7/2016

Amos 8:1-12
Psalm 52
Colossians 1:15-29
Luke 10:38-42

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

How many times have you heard this short story that forms our Gospel passage today - just 5 relatively short verses from Luke's Gospel. Perhaps one of the most well-known, and might I suggest poorly-understood stories of the whole Gospel.

Now when I say this I need to be very honest with you - because I have in the past certainly been one of the people who I think have missed the point of this story. Let me say now that I can no longer read this story and believe that Jesus is really saying that Mary is the better example of what it means to live a Christian life - that when he says "Mary has chosen the better part" he means that she, Mary of Bethany, is the only and true exemplar of a perfect disciple.

Just think back to last week - to the parable of the Good Samaritan, and how most sermons would have emphasized the *action* of the Samaritan in tending to the man lying in the ditch - caring for him; laying him on his donkey and taking him to be looked after. How, then, can Jesus say that it was Mary - the one doing nothing in today's story - who has chosen the better part.

Of course it is not that simple - Jesus' parables and stories and teachings are rarely that simple. But to me, more than ever, this is less a story about *comparison* (comparing and contrasting what Mary and Martha are doing), and more a story about *completion*.

It's about seeing and understanding what is the work put before us as Christians, and completing it to God's glory.

Martha's work, you see, was what was expected of her. Guests were coming and so Martha gets busy making sure everyone has what they need. This was - and more often than we'd like to admit, sometimes still is - what was and is expected of women. And that work not only was expected but valued. Indeed, there are few things that Luke lifts up as more important than hospitality in his gospel.

What was not particularly expected was that Mary would take the position of a disciple, one seated at the feet of Jesus listening to him teach. If hospitality was most often considered women's work, discipleship - and particularly discipleship as learning from the teacher - was most often considered men's work. Luke's Gospel has been recognized for years as having what we might describe as a more "progressive" view of women, as he regularly cites women as important to the mission and ministry of Jesus. But more often than not, the roles these women play are still supportive, providing resources and hospitality to the men who followed and listened to Jesus.

Mary, however, takes her place as one worthy to sit at Jesus' feet to listen and learn, right along side the men. So perhaps Jesus' admonition to Martha about "the better part" is not about the roles each plays - both have tremendous value in the gospels - but rather that Mary has seen the possibility of doing something different, actually of being someone different - a disciple of Jesus - in a way few would have expected or allowed a woman to consider.

Perhaps, that is, it's Mary's assumption that she is worthy to sit at Jesus' feet that he commends. She imagines and lives into a possibility that stretches the cultural norm because she is in the presence of the one through whom God promises that all things are possible.

Not only that, but based on literary patterns in the Gospels, I suspect that when Jesus repeats Martha's name, he is not expressing exasperation but deep affection: Martha, Martha, precisely because I love you I want you neither to be

distracted nor trapped by your work and role but instead imagine all that is possible for you, as Mary has done.

Taken in this light, I think this story is less about lifting up one kind of service - the contemplative life over the active one, for instance - than it is to stretch our imagination to what we see as viable options for our lives. What do we see? Whom do we see as worthy? How do we see ourselves? How do we see others? At times, even, do we see others at all?

And all of this is where I also find a way through this story to the tragic events of the past weeks. We have seen, as well as the international acts of terror in Brussels and Nice, the playing out of an age-old issue in the United States, with the shooting of two African Americans by police, and the subsequent attack on police officers in Dallas. From that has emerged the “Black Lives Matter” movement, which in turn has been criticized for itself being narrow and discriminatory.

At its heart, I believe, the Black Lives Matter movement is a plea, request, and demand to be seen. To be treated with equality. And it’s not that the activists of this movement don’t think all lives matter, it’s that they are critiquing a culture that acts as if some lives matter less than others.

And it doesn’t stop there. The massacre in Orlando, the resistance to admitting refugees to our country and sanctuary, the fear-mongering that has plagued our recent election, all of these are a result, in part, from our desire to hold so steadfastly to our own cultural norms and expectations that we refuse to see others as God does and cannot see the new possibilities God is still unfolding before us.

Mary and Martha cannot be about the better thing that means who is better, who acts better, who can be better. The better thing is the invitation to believe that you are who God sees you to be.

And that is precisely our problem. An inherent, systemic, ingrained, dysfunctional, disturbing belief that not all are worthy of God's regard and love. The conviction, as Paul Farmer says, "That not all are not equal in God's eyes. That all are not made in the image of God."

Much of the despicable violence unleashed in anger Dallas is part and parcel of a world and culture that constantly draws lines between who's in and who's out, who counts and who doesn't, who is worthy of respect and who is not. But here's the thing: it's clear from not only Luke's Gospel but the whole of the New Testament that whenever you draw a line between who's in and who's out, you will inevitably find Jesus on the other side.

So perhaps we can hear Jesus words to Martha not as rebuke but as invitation - the invitation to see more in herself than she thought possible and, in turn, to see the same possibilities in others. And perhaps we can then be more prepared to hear God inviting us to see more in ourselves than we've seen previously and, in turn, to see others - all others - also as God's beloved children.

This is not a story about comparison but completion. Not about who is better, but when is better. Not about what is better, but why it is better. Perhaps if we allow for a more gracious view of the Kingdom of God, we might be able to imagine more of the world as part of it -- even ourselves. And when we imagine ourselves as part of God's Kingdom, we are instantly called to bring about its presence here and now.

As St. Ephraim the Syrian said many centuries ago now, "Blessed are the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and blessed is the Christian who welcomes them both into his or her heart! May the prayers and intercessions of these two sister-saints beloved of Christ move us to imitate them both, and lead us toward the devotion and good works that represent the fullness of our life in Christ."

In the name of Christ. Amen.