

Pentecost 9C (7/17/2016)

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15-28

**Luke 10:38-42**

*Martha gets a bad rap. If she is at fault for anything, it's being overwhelmed with worries and forgetting her guest. Heaven knows there are plenty of worries to go around, and not enough paying attention to one another. Yet, Christ never ceases to come among us, bearing the gift of his peace and calling us back to himself and into relationship with each other.*

Martha gets a bad rap. The story of Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary is often interpreted in ways that denigrate Martha unfairly. She has been characterized, for instance, as an archetype of lesser faith, that is, Martha represents the mundane, material life whereas Mary represents the spiritually mature, contemplative life. But, the fact is that many of us identify with Martha. She is the dutiful host, the more conscientious of the two sisters. Certainly, Jesus can't fault her for exemplifying the kind of hospitality the biblical narrative so often commends. Think of our first reading from Genesis in which Abraham and Sarah leap into action to prepare a sumptuous meal for three strangers. Martha's reception of Jesus is akin to that.

The narrator does not tell us what constitute Martha's "many tasks," but it's safe to assume that she is attending to the responsibilities of receiving a guest. Maybe you know what that's like. The house has to be spotless, the meal has to be top-notch, the sheets and towels have to be fresh. There's so much that has to get done in order to honor the person who is coming to see you,

especially if it's Jesus. So, who can blame Martha for hopping to it, and for being a little miffed when Mary doesn't lift a finger to help? "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?"

It's helpful to note that **Jesus does not rebuke Martha for her exasperated outburst. Neither does he diminish her effort at hospitality.**

"Martha, Martha," he soothes, "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." **Martha's problem is not her labor of love, but her anxious distraction.** Her heart is not in the wrong place, only her focus. Ironically, while she attends to the details of her guest's visit, she neglects to attend to her guest.

**Mary, on the other hand, recognizes the gift of Jesus' presence and makes the most of it.** She sits at his feet like a disciple and listens to every word he has to say. For Mary, the opportunity to receive Jesus – to attend to him – is not to be missed. The relationship is paramount, so she forgoes other priorities to concentrate on it.

That's the meaning behind Jesus' mysterious reference to the "one thing" that is needed, the "better part" that Mary has chosen. The story of Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary does not drive a wedge between active hospitality on the one hand and quiet listening on the other. It doesn't hinge on the two sisters' differing approaches to receiving Jesus, but rather Mary's

single-mindedness. To borrow the words of one commentator: “‘There should only be one thing’ ...: this does not mean one form of devotion, but one object of devotion.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, there’s nothing wrong with hospitality so long as the purpose of hospitality is not lost amid the minutiae. And **the purpose of hospitality is relationship.**<sup>2</sup>

This is helpful guidance for Martha, but also for any of us who are prone to worries and distractions. Heaven knows there are plenty of worries to go around, most of which are much more significant than the cleanliness of our sheets and towels. We worry about the safety of black citizens who are confronted by police. We worry about the safety of police at public assemblies. We worry about tension in our communities and polarization in our political sphere. We worry about our physical health, our financial security, our children’s future. We worry about grieving members of our congregation.

In any given week, our attention might be divided between any number of legitimate worries. To us, Jesus has a word of comfort to offer: “There is need of only one thing,” he reminds us, “Here I am, focus on me.” It’s reminiscent of another refrain: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”<sup>3</sup> **We have good reason to be worried and distracted by many things, but Christ never ceases to come among us, bearing the gift of his peace and calling us back to himself.**

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew L. Skinner, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 267.

<sup>2</sup> See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 437.

<sup>3</sup> John 14:27b.

And, relationship with Christ comes to full expression only in relationship with others. Jesus promises to encounter us in the faces of friends and strangers, and especially those who suffer. Our worries and distractions have a way of isolating us from each other, of fueling our frustration and distrust. **But by a gentle word, Christ calms our hearts and refocuses our attention on what really matters. He invites us to reconsider our anxious behavior – to stop and think if our words and actions will drive us farther apart or bring us closer together in his name.**

Dear church, this is the gift of Christ's presence among us. Life with him is the *one thing* that holds us together in spite of all the reasons for worry and distraction. So, by his spirit, let's attend to each other with gentleness, and hold each other in love.