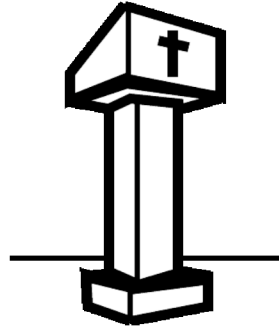


**Sermon Synopsis –
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Preached by Fr. Peter Champion
July 18, 2010**



**“Who’s Right? What’s Wrong?
Untangling the Story of Mary and Martha”**

Few of us who’ve been part of a church for very long have avoided hearing at least one sermon about Mary and Martha. I’ve preached a fair number of them over the years, and heard a number more.

Most of the sermons I’ve preached or heard have taken one of two approaches to the story of Mary and Martha.

-Either the preacher praised Mary for sitting at Jesus’ feet in silence, staring adoringly at him, and hanging on his every word. To me, that sounds like a teenaged boy’s fantasy—a woman sitting in silence at his feet, gazing at him adoringly, and hanging on his every word. Come to think of it, I know that any number of the sermons which have taken this approach were given by ordained men whom the church has helped stay stuck in early adolescence.

-Or, if the preacher wasn’t of the first persuasion, they tended to take the “Martha got a bad rap” approach. There was a houseful of people to feed. One of them was Jesus himself! What did Mary think—that the food would cook and serve itself? I reminded of the joke about the 3 Wise Women who went to the manger—they arrived on time, brought food for the family, and cleaned and organized the stable while they were there.

There is a contentious history to this passage. It speaks to the role of women in society and in the church, always a source of contention. It speaks about society’s preferences—either a preference for action (as in the German sociologist Max Weber’s famous ‘Protestant work ethic’), or the ivory tower preference for pure thought over messy reality. One of the commentators I read said that no matter which of these sermons you preach, you’re bound to offend somebody.

The bigger problem with these two approaches is that they both read back into the story the prejudices we already carry with us about these matters. If we’re conservative Christians who think women should be silent in church, we praise Mary’s silent attention to Jesus. If we’re feminist Christians, we praise Mary for pushing the societal envelope of her time—which taught that ‘proper’ women didn’t sit and eat with the men, and certainly didn’t participate in religious discussions with the rabbi. If we’re action oriented folks, we decide that Luke undoubtedly made a mistake when he wrote the story down—he must’ve meant to praise Martha and tell Mary she was a slacker. If we’re anxious people ourselves, we hear Jesus’ critique as a personal reminder of our own self-perceived failings.

I find the comments of Matthew Skinner, a professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, helpful in unpacking this story in a healthy way. He says that the basic problem with any of these approaches is that they are based on the notion that one of the sisters has to be right and the other wrong—that one has to win and the other lose.

These are, Skinner says, false dichotomies. And what gets lost in these false dichotomies, Skinner argues, is that both action and contemplation are essential parts of a balanced and mature Christian life.

Mary's careful listening to Jesus reminds us that we are all called to attend to the word of God spoken to us in myriad ways—in the Bible, in our tradition, in our rational thought processes, in one another, and in the still small voice that speaks within us when we allow ourselves to become still and truly listen for God's leading.

And Martha's service to Jesus and the community of followers reminds us that the life of faith involves attending to real people with real needs to be met. In Martha's case, there was a meal to fix and serve, dirty dishes to collect and wash. Anyone who's ever shown up at a church potluck where there are 50 folks present and only enough food for 25 people gets this.

As early in the life of the church as the time described in Acts, Chapter 6, we hear that the needs of the community were pressing enough for the apostles to set apart deacons to address the critical pastoral needs of the followers. And, Douglas Hall points out, at the conclusion of the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:37 (the verse immediately before this story begins), Jesus doesn't tell the lawyer to sit and listen, but to "Go and do..."

Discipleship—being followers of Jesus—inevitably calls each of us to pay attention both to the word of God and to the needs of others. What, then, are we to make of Jesus' rebuke of Martha?

If we approach this story from this perspective, it is clear that Jesus is not chiding Martha for cooking and serving rather than sitting at his feet and letting everyone go hungry. Pay attention to Jesus' words. He doesn't tell Martha to stop what she's doing and sit down next to Mary. He says "**Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.**" I don't think he's rebuking Martha, though that's the way the tradition has interpreted his words.

I think that what Jesus is doing is lovingly reminding Martha that she's lost her focus. Did you see the Budweiser commercial during the World Cup, where a player is about to take a penalty kick that will determine the match's final score? (Check it out on youtube.com if you haven't seen it...) In an attempt to distract the goalie, the kicker's fans hold up cards and create a giant picture of a beautiful young woman in a bikini and grass skirt.. Seeing the goalie's distracted look, the kicker thinks he's home free. But then the defense's fans hold up their cards—which show a giant bottle of ice cold Budweiser. The kicker loses focus—eyes on the beer instead of the ball—and misses the shot.

I think Jesus is reminding Martha that she needs to keep her eyes of the prize, to use the words of that wonderful black freedom song. And the prize is not a great dinner, but serving Jesus and following his way. In Matthew Skinner's words, "**When Jesus praises Mary for having chosen 'the better part,' he refers to her singular focus on Jesus himself... This does not mean one form of devotion, but one object of devotion.**"

I think that each of us as individuals, and every community of faith, tend temperamentally toward action or toward contemplation. The invitation Jesus offers us in this Gospel is to see both action and contemplation as essential parts of our spiritual journey and practice and to make sure we don't focus on one to the exclusion of the other.

And for those of us who tend to fret, Jesus invites us to remember that what seems so urgent at any given moment pales in comparison to our love of God and service to others. Jesus invites us to keep our eyes on the prize. May we listen to God and serve others, always looking to Jesus as the one who teaches and empowers us to do both.