

Called to Listen

If I only had a dollar for every woman who has told me that they don't like this story about Jesus, Martha and Mary!

It feels like a judgment on the women who do all the work. This morning we have Presby Cats in the kitchen preparing a great meal for the congregation. Maybe there is some progress in the generations, and they have men as well as women preparing the meal. They're working hard, they're taking care of the rest of us. If you've ever felt abandoned, say, at cleanup time, you know how frustrating it can be to be taken for granted. There are centuries, millennia of women who have been taken for granted while they worked in the kitchen.

And yet Jesus commends Mary, holds her up as an example? It doesn't seem fair.

This story from Luke's gospel directly follows the story of the Good Samaritan. I know that story is well-loved in this congregation. This is a congregation of doers, people who love our neighbors. Are there neighbors who might need help putting a generous meal on the table at Easter? The deacons are already planning to help them, and are happy to have help with that project. Are there neighbors who are struggling with basic household needs? Through Love INC, we stock a personal care pantry with toilet paper, and today we can see that generosity on display. Maybe those neighbors need help with home repairs, or a car, or furniture, or budgeting—today we'll commission our Love INC volunteers who make themselves available for needs that arise. I could go on and on naming the ways this congregation lives the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. This morning in the children's Sunday school class, the Good Samaritan is the lesson. Maybe you're thinking you wish you had signed up to teach Sunday school so you didn't have to hear about Martha and Mary!

But here's the thing. These two stories go together. Jesus told the story (or parable) of the Good Samaritan in response to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer who asked the question was having trouble understanding the commandment to love neighbors, so Jesus told him about the good Samaritan. Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit as he put the gospel together, saw an opportunity to illustrate the commandment to love the Lord in the story of what happened at Martha's house. So he put the stories back-to-back. An editorial choice. This is a story to show us what it means to obey the first of the two parts of the great commandment: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

It isn't Martha's hard work in the kitchen that's being denigrated. It isn't even a critique that she shouldn't be whining. It's that Mary, her sister, is the picture of a disciple who loves her Lord and is focused on listening to him. She's the parable of the good disciple. Attention to Christ is the foundation on which love of neighbors is based. Martha's many chores have distracted her from that. Jesus speaks lovingly: Martha, dear Martha. Come home to your source.

When we first started talking about a year of emphasis on "call," I think many of us envisioned activating latent calls, stirring people to more ministries, more volunteering, more activity. More Martha. What I've been discovering is that calls are rooted in a deeper relationship with God, and that going deeper in our spiritual lives precedes a true discernment of calling. More Mary. The inward journey feeds the outward journey, which provokes traveling further on the inward journey. Loving the

Lord and loving neighbors are not at odds with one another, they are complementary. When Jesus was on the mountaintop with 3 disciples, and Moses and Elijah appeared, God's voice said, "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him!" Our general call, issued to all of us, is a call to listen to Christ.

And that can be hard to do in our busy, busy world. Our attention spans are short. We are distracted, probably even more so than Martha. On the day this past week that I thought I'd spend some time in this scripture, reading what wise people have said about being still and maybe even practicing that myself, I reached the end of the day with these measurable activities:

- participated in 3 meetings, moderating 2 of them
- made 10 phone calls
- sent 15 emails, most to multiple people, and received 30
- sent and received several text messages
- had serious conversations with 2 church staff members
- organized the toilet paper display
- found the Rockhaven scholarships campfire pieces for assembly
- took some items dropped off at the church to the Salvation Army
- read ½ dozen articles online—one leads to another
- proofread bulletins and meeting minutes and a letter
- collected a handful of possible resources for my sermon
- worked an 11-hour day

Who am I to be preaching about being still? Now, I did read the Lenten devotional booklet's daily reading, and I can count 7 times in the day when I stopped--momentarily--to pray. Being part of church meetings ups that number. But truly being attentive to Christ, sitting at his feet to listen? I can totally identify with writer Karen Marsh who, on a long-awaited day of silent retreat at a Benedictine monastery, after 5 minutes of writing in her journal, felt like she needed a snack, went to her car and checked her email on her phone. "I know, I know, that's cheating," she writes. (2017, *Vintage Saints and Sinners*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, pp. 102-103)

Maybe you can also relate to this kind of hyperactivity, this level of distractability, this not-so-secret valuing of our importance by how busy we are. In other encounters with anxious people, Jesus offered wisdom for setting priorities from which we can still learn, saying, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness." (Mt 6:33) Author Glenn Hinson paraphrases this: "Seek first God's mysterious Presence and God's okaying of you." ("The Quantity Quotient Behind Busyness," *Weavings* xxii, no. 1, Jan/Feb 2007, p. 18) I think he's onto something, that our frantic behavior is frequently motivated by trying to measure up, to be good enough, to be "okay." The truth is, we're not okay, we need God to be okay, to give us peace in our hearts. When we have that peace, our drivenness diminishes. Hinson reflects, "God's okaying of us truly releases us from the burden of busyness and the prison of striving for worth through activity." (p. 21)

Many of us have to learn this the hard way. We get knocked down by illness, and can't be so busy, and then discover there's a gift in being still. We lose a job, and suddenly have time for family, and

find out that we've been missing a lot by paying too much attention to work. We crash and burn, and have to re-set our priorities to reflect a better balance in life. Often, it is in crisis that we realize that God was always at work on our behalf, seeking us and desiring our wholeness. In our weakness, God is there. In our failure, God redirects us, telling us once again, "You are my beloved."

Listen to Jesus.

There are times to "go and do," to love neighbors with sacrificial giving and caring. God gives gifts, making us able to help one another, to serve one another, to love one another. And God expects those gifts to be used. At the same time, there are times to listen and reflect, to love God with all that we are, to learn from Jesus and become his disciple. Knowing which side of this dual great commandment to heed at what times is a matter of spiritual discernment. Which example, the good Samaritan or the good disciple Mary, applies to us? Yes, says Jesus. It's a trick question, with a tricky answer. Both, of course. Throughout life's seasons, all along our pilgrim journey, the two must interplay.

Today's call story reminds us that the times we are called to listen are essential to a faithful Christian life. Unless we listen, how else will we know when it is time to act, to do? Few of us--likely, no one in this room--are called to a monastic life, solely centered on God. But most of us could use a few more monastic moments, pauses in our frenetic activity, to reconnect with God.

Karen Marsh, who admits to checking her email when she's supposedly on a silent retreat, has learned a lot about being a disciple from people she calls "Vintage Saints and Sinners." One of her favorites is Julian of Norwich, the 14th century mystic who lived in a room attached to the church, ate what people brought to her, counseled troubled souls through her window, and wrote a book about her visions. I picture Julian as a 14th century English version of Mary. Karen Marsh imagines going to Julian's window for counsel, and what Julian says to her speaks to all of us in our age of anxiety. I invite you to hear these words as if they were addressed directly to you.

Why are you not fully at ease in heart and soul? You seek consolation in things that are so weak, but in them you'll find no true relief. You are exhausted by evil and by comforts that have failed you. My child, if you could only see that at this very moment God is nearer to you than your very skin. God's goodness enfolds you like a velvety blanket. God loves you and wants to be known. Our Beloved is delighted when your spirit clings to him with all of your strength: so never lose your hold on his goodness. Let the God who is all-powerful, all-wise, all-good be your true rest.

(Vintage Saints and Sinners, pp. 144-145)

May our life's song truly be, "My soul is at rest in God alone; my salvation comes from God."