

Lectionary 16C (Pr 11C)
Grace Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
July 17, 2022

Amos 8:1-12
Psalm 52
Col 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Please pray with me...

Some years ago our whole family was at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival. The kids were still little and we had a wonderful time tasting new foods, seeing all of the performers and side shows, just wandering and people watching. You know. We came upon an artist who was drawing caricatures of folks and we decided that we would do this too. So, the caricaturist set about drawing us as a family. He found a peculiarity in each of us and then exaggerated it to comical proportions. Earl's receding hairline got some attention as did my braces. One of the boys had a slight gap between his two front teeth. Another had a splash of freckles that were barely visible ordinarily but under this artist's hand, were highlighted. A caricature – a picture or description of a person in which a particular characteristic is exaggerated for effect.

And I think that commonly the Gospel reading today has become a caricature in which we see Bickering Sisters – Martha, the doer, whining and complaining to Jesus asking him to get Mary in line and then Mary – quiet reserved pensive Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet soaking it all in. Mary the contemplative. And Jesus in the midst of them, ultimately chiding Martha. There there, Martha, you are stressed out. Take a look at Mary. She chose wisely. Be like Mary. SMH That is a very thin read of this Good News.

A theologian of the 20th century has said that few stories in the Gospels have been as consistently mishandled as this one. This story has routinely been interpreted as pitting Mary and Martha against each other – who was right? Martha the worker-bee or Mary, the quiet contemplative. In fact, I have often heard women define themselves either as a Martha or as a Mary – though to be honest I've heard more say that they are Martha's than Marys. And, once again, I am asking you to remember that Scripture contains a living word – a word that speaks to us again and again.

So, with that, I ask you to turn with me to a couple of key words or phrases in the Gospel reading today.

First, please look at the text in your worship folders and notice verse 39. Let's read that verse together: **She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.**

The phrase "sitting at someone's feet" has metaphorical meaning to us. When I was on field work while in seminary, Dr. James Crumley was the interim pastor at the parish to which I was assigned. Dr. Crumley was the former presiding bishop of the Lutheran Church in America, one of the predecessor bodies of the ELCA. He had vast parish experience, was very involved in ecumenical relationships, and was a pastor's pastor. One of my professors learned of this and said, "Pam, sit at his feet." Of course, she did not mean that I should assume that posture but rather than I should soak in his wisdom and learn from him all that I could. Sitting at someone's feet is a typical position for a disciple, one who learns, one who follows. Mary sat at Jesus' feet, Mary was a true follower of Jesus. And, in a common read of this Gospel, the inference is that Martha, busy in the kitchen, did not and was not.

But here's where things get a bit interesting. You see, an important word is missing in the English translations of this verse, except in the King James and the New King James Versions. And that word is "also." The Greek reads this way -- *She had a sister named Mary, who **also** sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.* Both Mary and Martha are recognized as followers of Jesus – they are not put in positions opposite to each other but instead are aligned with one another.

We are far too eager to jump to binary thinking. To -- it's either this or it is that. Is he red or blue? Is she gay or straight? Is that family a native to Lakeland or a newcomer? Are they locals or illegals? No.

Recognizing the word "also" lines folks up together rather than pitting us one against the other. Also is a pivot word in this text. And it dramatically changes our understanding of this important Gospel account. Not either Martha or Mary. Instead – both Mary and Martha.

Next, let's look at the pesky end of the Gospel reading – take a look at verse 42: **"there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."** In a plain read, it sounds like Jesus is denigrating Martha's service and instead honoring Mary's devotion. At the risk of going too deep into the weeds, here is a literal read from the Greek – *But one (thing) is necessary. For Mary chose the good part which will not be taken away from her.*

The GOOD part. What was it that Mary chose that Martha did not?

We have to go just a bit deeper to tease this out as well.

Martha is described as one who was distracted about the many things of her service. Distracted. Don't we each know what that is like – going along steadily on one thing and then something else comes up and we turn to that and then there's another and then we are engaged in a never-ending game of Whack-A-Mole. Turning from one thing to another and then not clear on any one thing at all.

And this brought Martha to a place of worry and distress and troubledness. Haven't we experienced that? What Mary chose that Martha did not was clarity of focus and attention to the matter at hand. Common understandings of this Gospel account pit quiet contemplation against active ministry and service because of the notion of the "better part." Either/or. Binary thinking. It doesn't work this way.

Last Sunday we reflected on the Parable of the Good Samaritan – and we saw that it was an unexpected one who was a neighbor to the one dying in the ditch, a Samaritan. And Jesus' last words to the lawyer who approached him were – Go and do likewise. Jesus espoused action. Jesus was a man who was engaged with others, those on the margin, those who were most in need – the poor, the sick, the disabled, the unemployed, the alien. Go and do.

And, remember who it is whom we ultimately serve. Let us sit at his feet. We need to sit at Jesus' feet while we roll up our sleeves.

So, my friends, I must say that sitting at Jesus' feet may take us to surprising places and to avoid that we may be tempted to set upon busy-ness to keep us distracted from the good part – which is the realization that in Christ we are new creations, created for new things, created for greater service, created for deeper prayer, created for new work. And in this we bear the Kingdom to a world that needs it so.

May it be so.