**July 21, 2019**

**The Rev. Barry P. Kubler**

**St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, Plant City, Florida**

**Sixth Sunday Pentecost, Yr C, Pr 11**

**Amos 8: 1-12; Ps 52: Col 1: 15-28; Lk 10: 38-42**

**In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen!**

**This morning’s gospel story about Jesus’ encounter with Martha and Mary always reminds me of my maternal grandmother. She was a classic Martha. When it came to hospitality, taking care of the home, and running the household, she had her priorities, was goal oriented and focused. And I admit to having inherited some of those characteristics from her.**

**So, let me begin by asking you this question. If you had your choice, who would you rather live with – Mary or Martha? For just a moment, I want you to consider your options. If you lived with Martha, the house would always be clean, neat and well appointed. You’d have three square meals on your table every day, and your life would probably be well organized.  On the surface, sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? Well, maybe.  Let’s take a closer look.**

**If you lived with Martha, you might have to put up with her constant worrying and fussing about this or that.  And, God help you, don’t leave your towels and dirty clothes laying around!  From time-to-time you might also hear, “Make your bed and clean up your room,” “Get your feet off the furniture,” “Don’t forget your chores,” or, “Put things away when you’re done with them.”**

**But, that’s Martha. She runs a tight ship, and in Martha’s house you better toe the line.**

**Then, there’s Mary.  If you lived with Mary, you’d probably be eating off paper plates a lot.  And I hope you like easy meals, like peanut butter and jelly, tuna fish and scrambled eggs.  Living with Mary, those foods would be considered a gourmet meal.  You probably need to be prepared for a little build up of dust in the house here and there as well. Dusting and vacuuming aren’t necessarily a priority with Mary. And, you might also want to take a course in washing and ironing your own clothes. Mary has another agenda, and it doesn’t include a lot of household chores.**

**So let me ask you again.  If you had your choice, who would you rather live with – Mary or Martha? A question which brings us to our gospel story from Luke. It would appear that Jesus has cast his vote. He’s going with Mary.**

**Now, at the very start there’s something important for all of us to hear, and take to heart. Our usual temptation is to focus on Mary’s actions as being those that should be the model to which we aspire. However, the writer of Luke’s Gospel did not intend for that to be the case. This story does not stand alone, in isolation from the rest of Luke’s gospel. Luke wants us to know that our relationship with Jesus Christ isn’t as simple, or straight forward, as making a decision between being like Mary or Martha.**

**My brothers and sisters, depending on life’s circumstances, Jesus Christ calls us to be both Mary and Martha. Sometimes he calls Mary to take on the role of Martha, just as he sometimes calls on Martha to take on the role of Mary.**

**The story of these two sisters is about one person who “sees and does,” and the other who “listens and hears.” Their story is also a counterpoint to last week’s Gospel story about the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan was a person who saw his neighbor in need, and did something about it. The Good Samaritan is lifted up by Jesus as being an example of how we should follow his command to “love our neighbors as ourselves.” As you will recall, at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, we’re told to “Go and do likewise.” As Christians it’s part of our baptismal covenant. Or, so it seems.**

**Following the story of the Good Samaritan, Luke immediately offers us a wonderful lesson in the story about Mary and Martha. But we need to hear this lesson not only for what it’s saying about these two women, but also for what it says in relationship to the story of the Good Samaritan. We need to understand those two stories in terms of “seeing and doing,” and “hearing and listening,” because both are important to understanding our relationship with God.**

**Perhaps the biggest mistake we can make in trying to discern the story of Mary and Martha is to view it as a Biblical definition for the role of women. That is not what this lesson is about. What it is about is our discipleship. And in order to understand the nature of our discipleship, we need to listen to, and hear, all of Jesus’ words, without—as Jesus tells us—being “troubled by many things.” (10:41).**

**The first thing we need to pay attention to is the role of Martha. In John’s Gospel, we’re told that Mary and Martha live with their brother Lazarus in the town of Bethany. A town that is only a short distance from Jerusalem. In fact, on a clear day you could easily see Jerusalem from Bethany. Here in Luke’s Gospel, Lazarus is not even mentioned. It is Mary and Martha that take center stage. That, in itself, is interesting, since the culture and traditional society of first century Judaism was incredibly male-dominated. And, as the story is told, it’s in the absence of a male relative in the home, that we begin to get a sense of a secondary focus to this story.**

**Martha does the inviting. We’re told that “Martha received Jesus into her home” (10:38). Her ownership of the home places her on a level of equality in a male-dominated society. Martha is definitely in charge of this encounter with Jesus. But in spite of her role as hostess—the one who has invited others into her home, she immediately takes on, what was then, a very feminine role within the house. She begins to prepare a meal for all those who have been invited in. However it might be implied, or suggested in Luke’s gospel account, we actually don’t know, outside Jesus, Martha and Mary, who was persent. None of the twelve disciples are specifically mentioned at all.**

**But let’s take note of what Martha is doing. She occupies the same role as the Good Samaritan in last week’s Gospel. She sees her neighbor—in this case Jesus. She senses a need—he’s hungry—and she begins to care for her neighbor by preparing food for him to eat.**

**Now, let’s shift the focus to Mary. What is she doing? Luke describes it this way, Martha “had a sister named Mary, and she sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.” (10:39). In picturing this encounter between Mary and Jesus, we may have an image of Jesus seated in some sort of chair, with Mary sitting on the floor—literally at his feet. But that image wouldn’t be accurate in either a traditional or spiritual sense.**

**“Sitting at the Lord’s feet” is a figurative, not a literal description. Jesus is most likely sitting on a rug, or on several cushions or pillows of some sort that are scattered on the floor for that purpose. Mary is also sitting on the floor, probably in front of Jesus — at his feet —while he is teaching. However, what we need to understand here, is that this was the normal position of a student — or a disciple. It was a position that was — in that time, and in that place — one of honor, and usually reserved only for men. In this story, Mary has been placed in the position of an honored disciple to Jesus. She is actively engaged in being taught by him. Her discipleship at that point is one of listening to, and hearing the word of God.**

**What Mary understands, and Martha has yet to percieve, is that this is a unique occasion. Something outside the ordinary visit of a neighbor. God has been invited into their home. Yet Martha is busy doing all the things that would normally be expected of her — the things she sees that need to be done. She is caring for Jesus in a traditional way. As if he were a neighbor who just happens to stop by.**

**What has happened here is that Martha has been distracted by her usual agenda — an agenda to serve. The 16th century reformer, Martin Luther, would refer to it as an “agenda to do good works.” But while Martha thinks she knows what Jesus needs at that moment, she has missed the point of his visit completely. Her understanding of her discipleship has been derailed for the moment. It doesn’t mean she isn’t a good disciple, it simply means she has momentarily been distracted.**

**While Martha’s agenda is to do things for Jesus, so that she might serve him better, Mary’s agenda is to sit quietly and follow Jesus’ teaching agenda - so that she might listen, hear, and learn.**

**Now, consider this idea for a moment. When Jesus was preaching the parable of the Good Samaritan, not only were the twelve disciples around him, we know from the text that precedes the parable that there were probably many other disciples around him as well. The seventy followers that he had sent out to engage in their ministry, had returned. They were quite likely listening to the story of the Good Samaritan as well. Is it possible that Mary and Martha were there too? Did Martha hear the command to love your neighbor as much as yourself? Did Martha hear Jesus say, “Go and do likewise?”**

**If Martha had heard the story of the Good Samaritan, she very likely thought she was doing what was appropriate at the time. She probably thought she was doing the right thing by asking Jesus to tell Mary to help her prepare the meal. The problem was that she, Martha, would have made an assumption about what Jesus’ needs were, and she missed understanding that Jesus was there—at that moment in time, and in that place—to fulfill her needs. She was working to feed him with physical food when he had come into her home for the purpose of feeding her with a spiritual food—the word of God.**

**My friends, I think this story of Mary and Martha, when considered in light of the parable of the Good Samaritan, serves as a spotlight on our own discipleship. There are times in the living out of our own discipleship that we see what must be done. We see our neighbor and we love our neighbor, so we follow Jesus’ command to “Go and do likewise.” But we also have to be aware that there is a real need for balance in our discipleship.**

**The Martha’s of the world are often so busy doing good and necessary things that they don’t realize how deeply they themselves need to be the recipients of Jesus’ presence. When Jesus visits us, he reminds us that we need the grace, the peace, and the Word that he offers. Rather than be distracted by the need to do things, or by being anxious and troubled about many things, we would do well to stop, take a deep breath, look and listen.**

**This story of Mary and Martha, is about giving and receiving, doing and being, and about the presence of Jesus in the midst of the ordinary that becomes extraordinary. It is a story about priorities, first things first, about two women who, in their lives and attitudes give our Lord and his Church an opportunity to teach an important lesson for our time.**

**It is also a story about our worship. Because it reminds us that what happens in our churches - our prayers, our praise, our instruction, and our fellowship - is not what we do for Jesus, entertaining him and busying ourselves with church “stuff.” Rather, it is an opportunity to ‘sit at Jesus’ feet,’ set aside the distractions of this life, and listen to Jesus’ message of grace, hope and love.**

**This coming week I encourage you to set aside the Martha in you and embrace the character of Mary. Listen for Jesus’ voice. Amen.**