

“The Practice of Listening”

August 29, 2021

Luke 10: 38-42

A Sermon Preached by the Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

School has begun across the country and in our local communities. With the start of school when I was a child, my mother would always instruct me saying, “Listen to what I have taught you: be respectful, mind your manners, help other students, be courteous, study hard, eat your lunch, try your very best....” And on and on. I read another story by a woman who was reminiscing about what her mother taught her. She says”:

1. My mother taught me religion. “you’d better pray that will come out of the carpet.”
2. My mother taught me time travel. “If you don’t straighten up, I’m going to knock you into the middle of next week!”
3. My mother taught me about contortionism. “Will you look at that dirt on the back of your neck!”
4. My mother taught me about weather. “This room of yours looks as if a

- tornado went through it.”
5. My mother taught me about anticipation. “Just wait until we get home.”
 6. My mother taught me about humor. “When that lawn mower cuts off your toes, don’t come running to me.”
 7. My mother taught me wisdom. “When you get to be my age, you’ll understand.”

Today’s scripture reading is about two of my favorite women of the Bible – they are sisters, so this is a family story. Mary and Martha, two women who have so much to teach us! Especially about motivations and perceptions and listening for and to God.

Prayer for Understanding:

Read Luke 10: 38-42

A little boy was overheard talking to himself as he strode through his backyard, baseball cap in place and toting ball and bat. “I am the greatest baseball player in the world,” he said proudly. Then he tossed the ball in the air,

swung the bat and missed. Undaunted, he picked up the ball, threw it into the air and said to himself, "I am the greatest player ever!" He swung at the ball again, and again he missed. He paused a moment to examine the bat and ball carefully. Then once again he threw the ball into the air and said, "I am the greatest baseball player who ever lived!" He swung the bat hard and again missed the ball. Pause. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "What a terrific pitcher I am!"

This morning's scripture reading is about recognizing our gifts, our strengths, and the places for potential growth. It is about setting aside our own agendas to pay attention to God; listen for God's renewing word to us.

It is about two sisters who encounter Jesus - Mary and Martha. The gospel of John recounts that they lived in Bethany, a small village outside of Jerusalem. They have a brother, Lazarus, who Jesus miraculously raises from the dead. It is apparent, according to the gospel accounts, that Jesus felt very close to this family. They were some of his closest friends. They may have even been his cousins through Mary, his mother. Jesus felt comfortable and secure in their home.

Mary and Martha, both encounter Jesus. But they have two very different responses to his presence in their lives.

First, let's consider what Mary and Martha have in common.

As sisters, there is a bond between them, even though they are quite different personalities and often fight or disagree because of how different they are. They are family. Family members support, love and encourage one another, even when conflict arises. In family there is a loyalty and commitment that transcends how individual members feel about one another at any given time.

Mary and Martha share a home. We are told that it is Martha's house. We don't know where the men are in this story; we presume that there are not any men around; no father, no husbands. Martha owns her own home; she must be a woman of means; a professional woman. This was highly unusual for women living in her day and in this community.

Jesus comes to visit both Mary and Martha in their own home; in their own world. We believe this about Jesus. Through his grace he initiates entering into our worlds. By entering into their home, the setting is an intimate one. We don't usually invite just anyone to come and dine with us in our homes. So, this is a special occasion; an intimate occasion among friends.

How the two women respond to Jesus' presence differs.

Mary - we know the least about her. She sits quietly at Jesus' feet. This, by

the way, was a position assumed by a disciple, sitting at the feet of a great teacher. This is a highly unusual posture for a woman to assume in Jesus' day. But Jesus has a way of turning our expectations upside down. Mary is attentive to Jesus' words. She is open and receptive to his teachings. In a sense, Jesus is assuming the role of host in this unique relationship with Mary. Jesus is giving, and Mary is receiving.

Martha - Martha is busy, busy, busy. There are a hundred things to do in preparing a meal for this very special guest. Dishes to clean and a table to set. Bread to knead and bake. Meat to broil, vegetables to cut up and prepare. Her hands fly in competence as she prepares for this dinner which she wants to be perfect. Her intentions are good. She wants to do this for Jesus. Martha finds identity in her productivity. But equating identity with productivity has its downside. We don't allow ourselves the time or space to be reflective; to listen to what Jesus might have to say to us.

Martha's busyness takes her away from Jesus; and actually, away from her sister. Martha is in, what my family calls, a snit. I can just hear Martha grumbling. Her sister is not in the kitchen, where, I might add, she is supposed to be. Whoever heard of a woman assuming the role of disciple, sitting at the feet of

Jesus, instead of preparing a meal for all the guests to eat. Mary's perceived laziness and inconsideration irritates Martha to the point that she cannot help but complain to Jesus. I have heard Martha's complaints in the church. Women have a tendency to be judgmental of other people who are not behaving or volunteering to help the way they think it should be done. In one of the previous churches I have served, a major feud erupted among the Presbyterian Women's circles because the "correct" tablecloths had not been used at a church social. True story!

Now, why would Martha complain to Jesus? If she had wanted Mary's help so badly, why not just ask Mary to please come help her in the kitchen? I suspect that Martha has a touch of jealousy in her. Jesus seems to be lavishing attention on Mary, enjoying their relationship. Jesus is not raving and gushing about Martha's productivity.

"Martha doesn't speak directly to Mary; she speaks to Jesus as a whining child would complain to her parent about the misdeeds of a sibling. The way in which she complains is not quite direct, not quite honest. No doubt Martha deserved some help, but she seems to be asking not just for help but for some kind of value judgment against Mary from Jesus." (Nancy Carter, "Mary, Martha

and Jesus”) I am reminded of the numerous occasions in which I have been preparing a meal or going about some other task, while everyone else is watching TV or “doing their own things” and I feel the rankling resentment, especially if there is a lot of staring at iphones! I feel put upon. Do you notice how the whining and complaining draws attention from Jesus?

Jesus’ response is one of invitation. He acknowledges Martha’s anxiety - for those of us who are doers, we are always concerned that perhaps what we do will not be enough. Jesus offers Martha a new relationship; a new way of being that is not valued by one’s productivity. Jesus loved and cared for both Mary and Martha. He recognized what we have such difficulty in recognizing, that we need both the Mary’s and the Martha’s. Jesus is not choosing between the active and the contemplative life. I believe that he is criticizing Martha for her inability to value and respect Mary, and perhaps more importantly, herself. “Jesus is calling Martha to be fully present to him and also to her sister Mary, to the present situation in all its human and divine dimensions. Martha needs to learn how to choose to do whatever she needs to do, and to let go of distraction in order to do it to God’s glory.”

Nancy Carter, in her book, talks about how in each of us there is Mary’s

voice and Martha's voice. Depending on who you are, one personality may be more dominant. Carl Jung talks about this in terms of our shadow sides. That just means that our growing edge is the weaker personality. If you are a Mary, you have much to learn and cultivate from the Martha part of you. If you are busy being a Martha, maybe it is time to pause and consider Mary's voice within you and learn from Mary's ability to listen.

Nancy says, "One of the exercises I set for myself was to think about Martha and Mary's hands. Martha is often shown carrying keys, a ladle, a jar. I thought of Mary's hands as empty, in a gesture of prayerfulness, or perhaps with a holy text in them. Nancy is describing the need for each of us to balance the contemplative and the active lives. Our spirituality needs to receive as well as give. If we are constantly giving then eventually the pitcher will become empty. Mary has learned the art of receiving. And Mary has something she can teach Martha, if Martha will only be still long enough to listen and pay attention to Jesus in her life.

Today's scripture lesson is to take time to be still and receive and know that the Lord, your God is in your midst. This is true for us as individuals. This is certainly true for us as communities of faith. "Be still and know that I am God."