

**Grace Episcopal Church**  
**July 21, 2013**

**Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell**  
**Text: Luke 10: 38-42**

This morning, we find Jesus still on the long, circuitous journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Spanning eleven of the twenty-four chapters of Luke's Gospel, they offer much space for events and for teaching moments that are to equip those who will need to carry on when Jesus' earthly life comes to an end.

To recap: this series of gospel readings began several weeks ago with Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem. Next, he sends out seventy followers in pairs to practice teaching and healing. They must travel light and depend upon the hospitality offered them by the households that receive them. Last week, we heard a lawyer asking what he would need to assure eternal life. Jesus approves the lawyers' own answer, loving God and neighbor, and tells him to go and do it—and, in response to the lawyer's second question, "who is my neighbor?" tells the parable that we call "The Good Samaritan."

And that brings us to today—the familiar story of the sisters, Martha and Mary. So often, we have heard all of these texts as independent, self-contained stories—just small snippets we hear on Sunday mornings with various messages drawn from them that bear little relationship to the other stories that precede or follow.

With the five short verses today we might, for example, focus on this story as a radical reversal of gender roles in Jesus' time—Martha is a female head-of-household.. Mary is allowed a place at Jesus' feet where the disciples sit to learn from the teacher. Such a focus would be more contemporary, as women's voices have become more common in biblical scholarship in the last 30-40 years.

We might debate the Greek words that indicate that what Martha was engaged in was diaconal work and wonder why Jesus chided her and didn't appreciate her efforts. We might

even parse Jesus' phrase, "there is need of only one thing" asking if he might have meant that a simpler, one-dish meal would have sufficed.

Most often we have probably heard this in a way that tends to create a split, a dualism that pits different qualities against each other—contemplatives vs. activists, "doing" vs. "being" or even the wise sister who has done the right thing vs. the foolish one who has not. This is not too far-fetched, of course, as Jesus does say that Mary has chosen the better part.

Have you ever wondered why such a tiny little story has resulted in so much conjecture and commentary? I think it's because it hits us where we live! So many of us identify with the hard working Martha that it hurts us when it seems that she is getting the short end of the stick.

And those "doers" among us—at home, work, or church—rise up on the side of Martha and her unending work of providing hospitality, crying "Foul" at Jesus' response to her complaints. "If we were all a bunch of Marys," we huff, "nothing would ever get done around here!"

What if, instead of hearing this as an independent story, we try to make meaning within the broader expanse of Jesus' journey? One thing we might recall is the bit about hospitality when the 70 disciples and followers were sent out. Jesus instructed them to take nothing with them, to accept what was offered by those who received them. "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road," he said. "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you..."

Such hospitality was crucial to those who lived and traveled in biblical times. We saw that this morning in the story of Abraham and Sarah and their three unexpected guests. Abraham observes this code of hospitality, offering it abundantly. As soon as he notices the three strangers who have appeared out of nowhere, he runs to them, bows low, and offers water for their sore and dusty feet, a bit of bread, and the shade of a spreading oak tree where they can rest. Then he serves them even more than promised—the very best of what he has. Offering food and shelter to the stranger, the sojourner, also became a fundamental part of

Jewish law. So, we would not expect that Jesus would be dismissive of Martha's efforts to observe the law, and to put a meal on the table.

We might also think of this story as a continuation of last week's text about the lawyer and the parable of the Good Samaritan. The key to eternal life was to "love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your neighbor as yourself." But the parable was mostly about loving the neighbor. And Jesus seemed to emphasize the "*doing*" to the lawyer. Twice. First, since he knew the right answer, he should go *do* it. Then, having determined that the Samaritan who cared for the robbed and beaten man exemplified the neighbor (as opposed to the priest and Levite who were both holy, observant men but who passed by the one in need), the lawyer was told to go, and *do* likewise. Yet, in today's text, Martha, who is *doing*, is the one who is scolded. What's up with that?

Could it be that this story now brings in loving God—a balance to last week so that both parts of the Great Commandment are addressed? And Mary, being attentive and quietly learning from Jesus is demonstrating loving God by putting herself in God's presence?

Could it be that Jesus is not commenting about Martha's *doing*—her providing the needed hospitality but about how that *doing* has become an end in itself—about *her*: "my sister has left me to do all the work by myself..." she whines. Her priorities have gotten out of balance, and it is no longer about her guests—or about why it is that she provides hospitality in the first place—for her guests or a way of loving God and neighbor.

Hospitality is about attending to the guest—not just physically by providing the food and shelter but also *enjoying* their company and receiving what they bring—their presence, their conversation, the relationship. I'm sure all of us can recall a time when we worked so hard at getting all of the details of a party or gathering right that it was all over and all the guests were gone when we realized that we never had a moment to sit down and enjoy one another's company! In this sense, it was Mary who was offering hospitality by her attentiveness.

Could it be that there is a sense of urgency in Luke's chronology that causes Jesus to be—shall we say—offensive to Martha? Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem where his earthly life

and ministry will come to an end. There is so much to teach those he leaves behind to carry on the Gospel message. And time is running short. There is an urgency in his mission that we have forgotten Over the centuries.

Certainly, there are more distractions than ever in our lives at work, at home, and at church. A while back a *New York Times* editorial by Bob Herbert caught my attention. It was a lament on these constant distractions that are made worse by technologies like tweeting and the need to continuously check e-mails as well as the expectation of multi-tasking. He talks about a character in the August Wilson play “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” who says that everyone has a song inside of him or her, and that you lose sight of that song at your peril. If you get out of touch with your song, forget how to sing it, you’re bound to end up frustrated and dissatisfied. Maybe Martha was out of touch with her song. Maybe we have forgotten how to sing it.

It's certainly easy to do, and our church is no exception. We are worried and distracted by many things—bats in the belfry and rock walls falling down. Rotting windowsills and copying machines. Not that these are unimportant and can be neglected. But we also must not neglect attending more intentionally to the basics of loving God and neighbor. We are formed through prayer, worship, and other spiritual practices that bring us closer to God, by being open to receiving and attending. There we are strengthened to go forth out of that deeper place to live out our faith and love the neighbor—both the neighbor sitting beside us and the neighbor outside these walls. Yet in going out and *doing* we do not leave behind the listening, the discernment. We leave room for God and God’s spirit to work. We trust that God is in our doing, even when it is not exactly as we might plan or expect.

In this interplay of formation and discipleship, we live into wholeness. It is no longer Martha or Mary. Contemplative life or active service. Doing or being. It is all of that—one endless circle.

Where we—each of us individually but also in community—can claim the better part, the one thing that is needed that will not be taken away. Where we can reclaim our song and remember how to sing it—at the top of our lungs.

Amen and amen.