

No Jesus, No Peace. Know Jesus, Know Peace

Luke 10:38-42

July 22, 2007

I.

Today's reading about Martha and Mary completes the second half of a biblical teaching that began last week about the Great Commandment. And you all know that the Great Commandment tells us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind; and then also to love our neighbors as ourselves

Last week's Gospel reading was the well known story about the Good Samaritan. That was the part about loving our neighbor, and we heard that loving our neighbor meant taking action. It meant doing the things that make us good neighbors.

Today's reading describes the other half of the Great Commandment, which is about loving God. And just as we saw last week that being a good neighbor is not always easy, today we see how we can become distracted from loving God by things that are part of our normal everyday lives.

In thinking about this story I am reminded of the famous heart surgeon who had a two part theory of life. Part one was don't sweat the small stuff. Part two was — it's all small stuff. But today's reading tells us that's not really true. It's not all just small stuff. There is a larger picture that we might be missing as we go through the day-to-day pressures and problems and schedules of our lives.

Luke's Gospel illustrates this point with Martha and Mary. It shows how the world can draw us away from our relationship with Jesus Christ, and how Jesus wants all we do to be centered in him and his teachings.

II.

With that background, let's examine what happened in this story. It begins by describing Jesus and his traveling party as "they." And if we go back to see who "they" were, it could have been the twelve disciples, or it could have been the seventy Jesus sent out in the community and who had returned, or it could have been a group somewhere in between those numbers.

In any event, it probably was a sizeable group of people who showed up on Martha and Mary's doorstep that day. Next we see that Martha appeared to be the hostess and welcomed Jesus into her home. We don't know if Jesus left the rest of the group behind and only entered himself, but that is unlikely to have been the case. Martha probably was preparing a meal for at least several people.

And while Martha was slaving away in the kitchen, her sister Mary was relaxing at Jesus' feet listening to him talk. Martha, however, became irritated because Mary was not in the kitchen with her, and she went to Jesus and asked him to tell Martha to help. Apparently Martha wasn't speaking to Mary at this point, and tried to convey the message through Jesus. Jesus, however, told Martha she was needlessly distracted and worried. He said that Mary had done the right thing by staying out of the kitchen and listening to him.

But we should note that Jesus never said Martha was doing the wrong thing. He never said that she should not be cooking in the kitchen. Rather, he made the point that it just was more important to listen to him as he taught and proclaimed God's word. And because that is what Mary, on her own, choose to do he was not going to ask her to leave. Presumably if Martha had done the same, she also could have been there.

So, the Gospel leaves us with Martha's choice and Mary's choice, and Jesus does not judge either except to gently rebuke Martha for allowing herself to be distracted and worried about her sister. If Martha had stayed in the kitchen it is likely that none of this ever would have happened, and that Jesus would have complimented her on the meal rather than telling her she was distracted and worried.

However, by coming in the room as she did, Martha put Jesus on the spot. She placed him on the defensive by basically asking him to publicly acknowledge that her cooking was more important than his teaching. Obviously he did not agree with that and was not about to tell Mary to leave.

As a result, the larger lesson we learn from this story is that we cannot allow the pressures, burdens, and anxieties of our lives in the world take precedence over our call to sit at Jesus feet, and to know and hear God's word.

There is a well known bumper sticker that's been around for a while. It's also the title of a book. It simply says "No Jesus, No Peace. Know Jesus, Know Peace." You have to think about that for a minute, and how the homonyms "no" and "know" make all the difference depending on which is used. In a way, the first is Martha, who chose not to be with Jesus because of what she thought were more important things, and the second is Mary, who put Jesus first.

III.

As we think about Mary and Martha we can see them as stereotypes or examples, and try to identify with one or the other, or perhaps both. I would speculate that in today's society most of us are Marthas even though we might understand the importance of being Marys. Some of us might even succeed some of the time.

But it is not easy to be Marys all the time. Jesus does not call us to do what comes naturally. He does not ask us to do things that we would do anyway. We are called to do what does not come naturally. Jesus wants us to do things that we probably would not always do if we were just left to our own choices. This can affect us individually, and it certainly can affect the church.

We all have experienced how life in contemporary society can be driven by the results we achieve. Martha is a symbol for the modern world. Promotions at work often are based on performance reviews, the respect of our colleagues can be linked to our accomplishments, and our own sense of self-worth frequently is related to our success. Martha would do well in these respects.

And Jesus does not say that these things are unimportant, or that we should not work hard, or that we should not try to be successful. But he doesn't want us to do it at his expense or on his time. He wants us to place him first. He wants to be the integrating center of all the many things we do and experience in our lives. He wants to be the hub of the wheel where all the spokes are linked to him.

In a very real way today's story about Martha and Mary raises the fundamental question of "why are we here?" and "what is the purpose of our lives?" There are several answers, but the biblical Christian answer is that, in the largest sense, we are here to prepare ourselves for eternity in God's kingdom.

Certainly we also have other subsidiary purposes. We are here to have children and continue the human race. We are here to organize a safe and orderly society. And we are here to be peaceful and happy, and to live fulfilling lives. Jesus wants these things for us.

But if they are subsidiary purposes, then our principal and primary activity is to do what Mary did. If we do this, all else will follow. Matthew's Gospel tells us to "seek first his kingdom and righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (6:33).

IV.

And this issue is not limited to our own personal lives. The church is a notorious place for Marthas to flourish because there is too much to be done by too few people. I have seen situations where people in a church seem more concerned about what other people think of them than what God thinks, or where they are more like social clubs than the Body of Christ.

It's sad to say, but many of our churches are becoming more secularized, the spirit of Martha is becoming the norm, and the spirit of Mary is lost or submerged.

And again, just like our personal lives there is nothing wrong, in and of itself, with church programs, church committees, and all the other things that happen in church on Monday through Saturday. They are essential parts of church operations, and should be blessed as long as we don't forget why we are here on Sunday.

But like Martha, we can get distracted and worried about the details of church that are staring us in the face. We can neglect the source of our faith and salvation because we don't see any deadlines or schedules attached to Jesus. We might think we can ask him to wait while we do more urgent things.

I see what is going on in the Episcopal Church today, as well as in other denominations, and I grieve for how the truth and joy of Scripture is being subordinated to agendas. Today's Gospel tells us that once our agendas become holy, then what really is holy is forgotten. And once the holy is forgotten it will not be long before the spirit is corrupted and true worship no longer is possible.

On the other hand, the Gospel also tells us that when Jesus is invited in, and when we sit at his feet as Mary did and listen to him, then things change. Then churches can be vibrant and spirit-filled communities where people can experience Christ's love and be drawn into transforming relationships with God and one another.

V.

The point of all this is that the details and demands of our schedules, and the work we do in church, do not have to be in conflict with knowing Jesus and hearing God's Word. It is a matter of how we understand our lives in this secular world in relation to the spiritual disciplines to which we are called.

Jesus comes first, and the world comes second. Jesus wants to take possession of us but the world also threatens to do the same. Like Mary's choice and Martha's choice, it is up to us. And the good news is that it is not a situation where if we choose Jesus we cannot be happy in the world. It is not an "either/or" situation, and in fact it is just the opposite.

One of the basic pillars of our faith is set forth in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul there says in chapter four, "let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (4:5-7). *Amen.*