

**July 17, 2016**  
**9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Luke 10:38-42**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

We have in today's gospel, an engaging encounter of the family kind, when Jesus visits the home of friends. For some this is a much loved story. For others, it is more loathed than loved.

In chapter 9, Luke tells us Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem, meaning he was headed in the direction of conflict, confrontation, and eventually death. So there is a certain growing intensity underneath everything that goes on around Jesus now. Jesus has just sent a group of 70 out ahead of him to begin doing the kingdom work he has been doing – healing and casting out evil spirits, and telling those whom they meet that these things are happening now because God's kingdom has come near.

It's hard and challenging work Jesus has been doing. I can just imagine he is so looking forward to this chance to rest for a bit, to share quiet company, good food and conversation with this family he considers friends – Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Now from its initial reading, you might think this is a story about sibling rivalry between two sisters. But it's not that. And it's not about one sister having better and more valued gifts or personality than the other. And it's not about women being best suited for a particular kind of work – the cook and waitstaff work – the service industry. This story is about the challenge of “keeping the main thing the main thing”, the one most important thing.

In this story the main thing revolves around the nature and practice of hospitality. Anyone coming to your home was expected to be treated as an honored guest, given water to freshen up, and as for the meal – setting out the best dishes, serving the best cut of lamb, a good wine, warm hearth-baked bread.

The two sisters Martha and Mary each respond differently to Jesus when he visits their home. Sister Martha appears to have been the planner, the organizer, the detail person. She is all about overseeing the preparation and serving of a delicious meal, the best the family can offer Jesus. The table has been set, and it's time for the final preparations, and of course, it was the women who did that serving work, seeing to creature comforts. Martha has been excited about preparing a wonderful meal for Jesus. That is the main thing for her.

So imagine Martha's surprise when Mary has not joined her in the kitchen to help get dinner ready. "Where is that Mary, anyway?", I can imagine Martha muttering as she bangs the pots and pans a bit loudly, with some evident exasperation. Martha needs help to pull this dinner party off well!

Meanwhile, Mary has done a very bold thing and dared to go completely against social convention. She stays out of the kitchen and sits down at Jesus' feet, listening as he talks, just like one of his disciples would. He is a rabbi, after all. And for his part, Jesus has not bothered to shoo Mary away and into the kitchen. We don't know the content of their conversation. They could have been catching up on everyday events. Perhaps Jesus was telling stories from the road and the people he met. They could have been talking about some portion of the Torah. If that was the case, Jesus was ignoring social taboos, too, because generally rabbis thought it was better to burn the Torah than teach it to a woman. And there sits Mary, engrossed in conversation with Jesus. Men and women just didn't do that in public in that culture.

Now it's very interesting what happens next. Strong and healthy communication most often happens directly between two people. But that does not happen here. Martha, instead of going directly to Mary to confront her, goes to Jesus instead. Now this isn't very thoughtful behavior by a hostess, is it, pulling your guest into the middle of a little irritation that could turn into a bit of a squabble? "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Well, since Martha asked, as a matter of fact, Jesus doesn't care that Mary isn't in the kitchen helping. But he *is* concerned about Martha. "Martha, Martha", says Jesus, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

I can imagine Martha walking slowly back to the kitchen, stunned by this encounter with Jesus, mulling over what he actually meant when he said, "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part." What exactly is going on here? Both sisters know and love Jesus and are delighted that he has come. Both women are well aware of the proper social etiquette of being a good hostess, and the importance of hospitality.

But it is not the type of hospitality shown that is important – whether active service or attentive listening and conversation. Both are important. It is the focus of the hospitality that is the key. Mary chose to sit and listen, to be fully attentive and present to Jesus, like a disciple, a learner. Martha is focused on the tasks of preparing a lovely dinner. But the problem is she has lost sight of why she is doing this in the first place – she loves Jesus and wants him to know how happy she is that he has come to their home to

visit. She surely wants to please him, make him feel comfortable, welcomed and wanted.

The thing is, hospitality is really about tending lovingly to one's guest. Martha gets worried and distracted by the doing, so that it becomes now about her. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left ME to do all the work by MYSELF. Tell her to help ME." She has called Jesus Lord, but seeks his assistance for her plans, rather than to learn from him. Worried and distracted. Martha let other things, good and well-intentioned things shift her energy from the one who was the focus of her hospitality in the first place, her guest, her Lord.

Notice Jesus does not scold Martha in this encounter. Rather he invites her into a different way of thinking and being. Jesus is inviting Martha into deeper and more intimate relationship with him. Nice as a good home-cooked meal is, it's the company, the companionship with him that matters most. He is on his way to Jerusalem. Life is going to get very difficult. He will find himself increasingly alone. Soon he'll be gone and it will be too late, too late for loving conversation and companionship.

Jesus is inviting Martha, and us, to get caught up in the joy of this immediate moment right now, of being in his presence so that we might forget, even if for only a little while, all the little worries, headaches and concerns that distract us from the Lord's presence with us. A presence full of mercy, grace, and love.

This invitation comes to us all the time, wherever we are. It doesn't matter what we are doing. The quality of attentiveness we bring to God's presence and purpose in all our activities and responsibilities is what matters most. We all know how easy it is to lose focus on God even when we're doing things in and for good causes, including the church. Consider two instances in our parish life that can sometimes challenge our focus.

I like to stop in occasionally at the Thursday morning free breakfast. I don't help in the kitchen, because that work is always well in hand when I get there. Rather, I usually try to sit down and chat with one or two of the guests, learn a bit about them, and how things are going for them right now, to just be present. Occasionally I am asked to pray for them, or they say "yes" when I offer it. The great joy is that I am not the only person who does this. Many of those who help with preparing and serving slow down and for a few moments take a bit of time to chat, to be present and attentive to our guests as real people, the beloved children of God they are. Many of our breakfast crew engage in both the doing and being of serving as hosts.

Another instance from our common life that is worth some reflection is service on the vestry. We all know there is a certain amount of business that is part of the vestry's work, discussion and decisions needed, often around stewardship of finances and care of properties. I've seen it with vestries in other churches. Sometimes a sort of worried and distracted busyness can settle in and we become anxious to get through the meeting and move on to the next thing on our agenda for the day. It is so easy to lose sight of the object and intent of our work, to be drawn closer to God's heart and loving will, even while we engage in tasks serving the parish and community. There is always that tension in Christian discipleship between listening and learning, and doing.

The good news is that God is present wherever we are, whatever we are doing. At your office or business, playing with your grandchildren, shopping at the grocery store, getting your car serviced, waiting in the doctor's office. There is holiness in us and in these ordinary places and encounters, just like Christ's holy presence is there for us in bread and wine. Always God's desire is for us to know the depth of God's love for us. Our task is to "keep the main thing the main thing" – showing our love for God through worship, prayer, and active service. Being attentive to God **will** affect how we treat others. We, like Mary and Martha, are invited each day to be fully present and attentive to the God we love, even as we serve the world in Christ's name. AMEN.