

Amos 8:1-12

Psalm 52

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

There are a number of things that I do fairly well, but cooking is not one of them. Trust me. You don't want me to feed you. When I go in the kitchen to cook, everyone is shoed out of the house, the TV goes off and I hide my phone. I need every bit of concentration I can muster to read a recipe and sometimes I have to read it outloud. And if someone interrupts me while I'm reading, I have to start all over again. I am definitely not a Martha. A person visiting my house could easily starve to death!

But preparing food for someone is the Hallmark of hospitality. There's no question that both the Old Testament and the New Testament set great store by hospitality. Abraham and Sarah host three strangers by the oaks at Mamre who turn out to be angels who predict the arrival of their only son, Isaac. [Genesis 18:9] Culturally, hospitality is expected. It is a duty and an obligation. And it is also a privilege. When Jesus sends his 70 followers out, he tells them to go out completely defenseless and to depend on the hospitality of those they meet along the way. [Luke 10:1-11] God explained the essence of the law to the Israelites while they were still in the wilderness by saying "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." [Deuteronomy 10:19] Hospitality is not just a cultural norm. It's also a commandment from God.

So when Jesus shows up at the house of Martha and Mary, he knows that he is going to get a good meal, if nothing else. He's hardly a stranger to them. He is a close and beloved friend and teacher. As he gets settled in for the evening, Martha goes into the kitchen to begin preparing their meal and Mary sits down at his feet and hangs on every word. Her focus is completely on Jesus. It doesn't take long for Martha's temper to begin to rise. Can't you just here those clay pots being put down hard on the table and those vegetables being chopped with great fanfare and more energy than they need? Culturally speaking, Mary is supposed to be in the kitchen

with Martha helping to prepare the meal. That's where women belong, not at the feet of a rabbi like a disciple would be. Mary is out of line and letting her sister Martha down and Martha wants Jesus to do something about this injustice. It's not fair! Why should I have to do all the work while she just sits and listens to you? Tell her to come help me!!

But Jesus doesn't do that. Instead he gently chides Martha about being worried and distracted which seems somewhat unfair and out of character for Jesus. Martha is doing what she's supposed to be doing. She's preparing a meal for Jesus. She is living up to the very best notions of hospitality. And preparing meals is woman's work and she has every right to believe that Mary should be in the kitchen helping her out. So what is Jesus up to? What does he want us to see?

It's not an accident that the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Martha and Mary are presented to us back to back. Jesus had asked the lawyer what scripture has to say about how to inherit eternal life. The lawyer gave the right answer "...to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself." The Good Samaritan embodies love for the neighbor. Mary's attention to Jesus embodies love for God. Both the Samaritan and Mary are socially disqualified from being models of anything good according to the norms of their culture and yet they are both images of the kingdom which Jesus brings near. But where does that leave Martha?

Martha is fulfilling a traditional role of serving others which is just as important in the kingdom that Jesus brings as the love of neighbor and the total focus on the word of God. Paying rapt attention to Jesus is one way to express love for God. And preparing and offering nourishment for his body is another way of expressing love for Jesus. Both gifts are important. One is not more important than the other although for centuries this passage has led theologians to suggest that Jesus' reaction to Martha and to Mary reveals his preference for the contemplative spiritual life rather than the active, serving life. That's not necessarily the case.

Maybe Jesus is chiding Martha not for what she's doing...fixing the dinner...which needs to be done, but for her worry and her distraction that prompts her complaint about Mary...who is

doing what needs to be done also. Hospitality isn't just about providing food. It's also about paying close attention to the guest. It's about the focus being on the guest. Disinterest in the guest or being too busy to pay any attention to the guest is not hospitality. It's obvious that Jesus loves them both because he doesn't want Martha to be worried or distracted. He wants her to be calm and peaceful and to be able to appreciate the company of her Lord. Although, if I were cooking dinner for Jesus, I wouldn't just be distracted and worried...I'd be beside myself! But Jesus seems to be telling her that worry won't do a thing for her and being distracted means she's missing what's right in front of her...Jesus!

Maybe Jesus isn't passing judgement on Martha. Her gifts are sorely needed by Jesus then and by the body of Christ in the world, the church, now. What would any congregation do without its Marthas? So maybe this isn't about judgement. Maybe this is not an elevation of the contemplative life over the active life which calls many women and men to ministry. Maybe this is a matter of interpretation from Greek to English. Theologian John Shea observes that while in English we hear that Mary has chosen the 'better part', in Greek the word is translated as 'good.' Mary has chosen the 'good' part meaning that she has chosen the connection to God who is good, the foundation and energy of effective action. Being filled up by God is the foundation of doing good works in God's name. It the underpinning of all of ministry. This is not an either/or situation. It's a both/and message. God's word sustains us all the while God is summoning us to work through service to others to bring about the kingdom Jesus came to share with us...one of justice, mercy and peace.

So we needn't choose between Martha and Mary. We need both. It's not about a judgement about which is better. Maybe it's about grace. If we're going to spend time with God, God has given us the grace to say 'no' to the things that would distract us from focusing on God. We've been given permission to say 'no' to the Sunday morning sports team. Maybe to say 'no' to having a perfectly clean house. Maybe it's saying 'no' to staying late at work when we know it's probably not really necessary. Maybe we are being given permission to say 'no' to being so busy that we don't take time to focus our attention on what is most important. We are being

given permission to choose the good portion...the one that connects us to God and to relax at the feet of the Lord.

No one on their deathbed ever says, "I wish I had spent more time at the office." or "I wish I had been on more committees" or "I wish I had spent more time on social media or watching TV" Most people say, "I wish I had spent more time with my family and friends" and "I wish I had paid more attention to God."

The story of Martha and Mary is **our** story. We all have ways of welcoming the stranger, of fulfilling a ministry, of contributing to the welfare of the whole in our church and in our community. All of it begins with a full focus on God...rapt attention to Jesus. We Have Jesus' permission to chose not to be worried and distracted and to say 'no' to worry so we can sit at the feet of the Lord. Mary did. She chose the 'good' portion and we can, too. It's OK to say 'no' to the world sometimes and choose the good portion that will sustain our souls. We all deserve to sit at the feet of Jesus. It's a choice that we are allowed to make and it will not be taken away from us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.