

July 17, 2016

First Sunday after my Sabbatical

First, let me say how glad Lynn and I are to be back among you. Our time away was wonderful and renewing. Over the next several months, you will be hearing about my experiences and what I learned and what I hope to bring back to our community. I believe it will help guide us in the discernment of our common life and ministry. Today, though, I will try not to be like the new seminarian who crams everything he has learned into one sermon.

Second, I need to let you know I changed the direction I was going to take on this sermon. I hope it was because of the Holy Spirit. You see, I love the story of Martha and Mary. It is one that mystics and teachers have meditated on and taught for centuries. It captures so many issues at different levels—different personalities; family dynamics, especially between siblings; and the common tension between contemplatives (reflective types and thinkers) and workers (“get it done” types and organizers).

The story is rich soil from which to preach. It can also get people upset, especially those of us who are “Martha” types, because we already often feel put upon and taken for granted. I tend to be like Martha, so I know. However, these past three months I have been trying to be more like Mary, so I have a new perspective. Today, though, I want to use Mary and Martha to help us consider how to respond to our world and all the many issues we face.

So what is going on in the world today? It is hard to read the newspapers or our smart phones without wondering about that. The horror we learn about each week seems to make the horror of the past week fade away, at least as far as our ability to concentrate on multiple issues.

We have learned about horrific events from Charleston and North Charleston, Chattanooga, San Bernardino, and Orlando, and then Louisiana, Minnesota, and Dallas. And that’s just in the U.S.! There is never ending conflict throughout the Middle East, terrorist attacks around the world, including most recently in Nice, France on Bastille Day. What is going on?

It is easy for us to feel helpless and fearful and have those feelings turn to anger and resentment and a desire for someone to swoop in and make things better. Here is the challenge with that reaction—there is no superman who can do that for us. **I assure you of that.**

And as strong and brave as our police and military are, they cannot completely control the world. They can and do work hard to protect us and others who are innocent. But we all need to do more to support the brave work that they do every day. And that is where those of us who follow the faith of Jesus have a role to play.

If we believe in Jesus, we are not allowed to be neutral. If we believe what we profess in our baptismal covenant, we cannot be indifferent. We may have different political ideologies that we think best serve the common good. But as Christians, the common good is defined for us. It includes-- “respect the dignity of every human being” and “seek and serve Christ in all persons.”

Those are our goals if we follow Jesus. They are noble aims; some may say they are idealistic. So the issue then becomes how do we translate these faith-based goals into our real lives, our political discourse, and our personal and community relationships and actions?

The story of Mary and Martha may help us here. They represent two ways of being in the world. They are not right and wrong absolutes. They are windows into what is and what is needed based on our situation in life. What Mary exemplifies for us is the importance of **listening**. As important as “doing” is, listening is a more basic requirement in life. Otherwise, we may miss something that is important in what we do.

In our world today, there are people who are demanding to be heard. Some do that in ways that annoy us, frankly. Recently Ambassador Andrew Young, a hero of the civil rights movement in our country, was asked by Mayor Kasim Reed to speak with the Atlanta Police Department. Ambassador Young told the officers, “You will be dealing with some unlovable brats out there. Keep your cool.”

That is true of some protesters and their actions (you and I have seen them on the internet and TV news); but it is not true of the vast majority of them. And regardless of how some of them may act, we need to hear what they have to say as part of our commitment to “respect the dignity of every human being.”

Because there really is something there. A conservative, Republican U.S. senator from South Carolina said that this past week. You see, Sen. Tim Scott is black. He said he has been stopped **seven** times by police just in the past year. He said sometimes he may have been speeding, but more often it was because he was driving a new car in a nice neighborhood.

In addition, more than once, he has been stopped and forced to show his I.D. before entering a restricted congressional area, even though he was wearing the prestigious U.S. Senate lapel pin. That does not happen to the other senators who are white. There is something there. This is not coming from young, “Black Lives Matter” protesters; it is from a conservative, U.S. senator. And again, regardless of the source, we need to listen to what people say, like Mary at Jesus’ feet.

We need to listen so we can better manage-- and as needed, redirect-- our “Martha” impulse. You see, Martha types want to get things done. I know, because I am one. We want to fix things, provide for people, protect people, and stay busy. Because there is A LOT to do!

There is nothing wrong with that at all. ***Unless we don't know what we're doing.*** Or, to say it more graciously, unless we fail to understand the whole story. That's why we need to ***listen.***

Let's think about this in our own lives. Have you ever known about something-- either from personal experience or professional expertise-- and tried to have a conversation with someone who has neither and yet acts like an expert in the field? We see that on social media a lot (that's a whole other topic!). How do you feel in that situation? Frustrated? Angry? Do you just nod your head and think to yourself, "This person is a..." well, you fill in the blank.

Let's look at an example about personal experience that roughly half of the people here can relate to: what women must put up with in life. Believe it or not guys, their lives are different from ours. And though they love us, especially those who are their sons and fathers and husbands and friends, they have experienced things in their work life and personal life that we have not. They endure stupid comments and disrespectful looks and patronizing attitudes and sometimes worse from some men. And even the best among us men don't fully get it. If we are wise, we listen to their experiences and try to learn, be more aware, and change. Thank God they love us anyway.

An example of this regarding professional expertise comes from our son-in-law, Cory, who is getting his PhD in Psychology. He is really smart (that is why he married our daughter, Katherine). As we were all sitting around during our family vacation, the topic of various pop psychology theories came up. He was nodding his head (I do not know what he was thinking). He was polite, but eventually he became passionate about his field of expertise. He explained some of the flaws in what we were saying versus what he knew from research. I came away with a better appreciation of a field that I too often talk about as if I really knew what I was saying.

So it is in our world today. Life is complicated. There ***are*** things we do not understand. A simple Martha reaction—proclaiming this is the way it is and this is what we should do-- may make us feel better and more secure... and it would be **dead wrong** and **make things worse**.

Some of us may be saying, "Well what *can* we do?" The answers are complicated and uncertain and beyond my expertise and the scope of this sermon. The good news is that we have days, weeks, months, and even years to explore the answers together. There are at least two things I would like to offer to all of us in the near term:

1. Offer us more opportunities to **pray** together: Here on Sunday mornings of course, but also at church in this new beautiful space, I'd like to have a service of prayer every day in the week. This can help us all learn how to pray at any time, whether we are in groups or alone. Prayer is so important to help us be still and listen to the Spirit and to others, like Mary at Jesus feet.

2. Offer more opportunities to meet in **small groups**: We need to reflect on and discuss our faith in the context of the important issues of the day. Some of these small groups exist in our parish already, like EFM, Community of Hope, and Home Groups. This summer, we will hold an open house about all these options-- and a couple of new ones-- to help you find the best fit for your life of faith. These groups will help shape us so that we may reach out to people we might otherwise ignore. In today's world, ignorance is not an option if we want to be safe and to flourish as a nation and a world.

These two things alone are not enough, of course. We still need the police and military. We need to respect and appreciate them and their dangerous work. There *are* bad actors in the world that harm innocent people. We also need to be sure our police and military receive the training, support, and resources they need to do their job in a complex and dangerous world. And we need to do our part "to challenge ourselves and the world to love like Jesus."

So we will be talking and praying about these complex issues in the future and discerning how to respond as a community. Based on how we listen and what we learn, we will join together to take appropriate action in our world. Because the world needs us to listen and learn and act with the faith of Jesus.

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we pray for those of us with hard hearts, that You would break them with Truth to make an opening for Love. We pray for those of us with broken hearts, that You would bind them up and keep them strong for the struggle. We pray for those of us with timid hearts, that You would give us courage to follow You as You build the Beloved Community. In the name of the One who was falsely accused, violently abused, and killed by the powerful of his day. Amen.