

“Rest In Jesus”
The Reverend Allison Caudill
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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I was ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church in February. This is the first ordination, the time that I got a collar and a title and started getting mail addressed to "the reverend." Some people stay deacons for their entire lives, while others, like me, eventually become ordained as priests and take on new roles. To become a deacon, I took vows, and people prayed over me, and our bishop laid his hands on me and asked God to change me into something new. I became a deacon, which comes from the Greek word diakonos, which means servant. When I took my vows, I promised God that I would give my life to service of the poor, the sick, and those the world has marginalized and forgotten. I promised to be a servant.

In this passage from Luke that we just heard, one of the characters is being a servant, a deacon even. In the original language that this Gospel was written in, Martha doesn’t simply welcome Jesus into her home. She welcomes him in, and begins to daikon, to serve him. Martha shows a wandering preacher and his crew of homeless and jobless friends the best hospitality and service that she is capable of. Martha is the aunt who always keeps the fridge full, our grandma that would never allow a visitor to leave without a full stomach. With Jesus and all his friends in her home, Martha, a faithful servant, a good deacon, is understandably busy. She has thirteen new mouths to feed, clothes to wash, beds to make and floors to sweep. Honestly I can’t say that I blame her for feeling stressed.

When her sister, Mary, decides to forget the chores and just sit and visit with Jesus and their other guests, I don’t think we can blame her for being a little mad either. Martha pulls Jesus aside because she knows that what he has to say matters, and that people listen to him. She appeals to Jesus, the son of God, to get her sister to help her serve. I am sure that Jesus could have commanded Mary to cook a whole feast in a half hour and it would have happened, and I’m sure he could have turned all of Martha’s water into wine if he wanted to be house guest of the year. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t command Mary to get in the kitchen, and he doesn’t compliment Martha on her hospitality. Jesus looks into Martha’s stressed out, angry, frustrated eyes and says,

“Martha, Martha.” He looks into the eyes of a child of God, his own, and says her name. He looks at her, and reminds her of who she is, because she doesn’t see what is right in front of her. Martha, Martha. A faithful deacon, a strong and willing servant. “Martha, Martha. You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” Jesus has not come to this house to be served, but to serve. Jesus does not need Martha to be the perfect hostess. He needs her to be Martha. He needs her to let herself be seen. To be served. Jesus is inviting her to accept the hospitality of the God who loves her even when the house is unkempt, even when dinner is late and she is too tired to make the bed. Martha is worried, and distracted, trying to be all things to all people, trying to make everyone happy until there is almost nothing left of herself. The Lord comes to her, right where she is, in the middle of her hustle and bustle and her attempts to pull it all together all on her own, and invites her to rest a while, to be with him, to be served by him. That isn’t an easy thing to do. It is not easy to step out of busyness, to let go of our distractions and the demands all around us. It’s not easy to be vulnerable, exposed. It’s not easy to accept help. Martha probably didn’t even think she needed help, not this kind anyway. Martha thought she needed help with the dishes, or the laundry, with the distractions and the demands. Martha was asking for help to stay the same. Jesus offers her a different kind of help, an opportunity to change. There is need of only one thing. Brothers and sisters, we are worried, and distracted, by so many things. We are guarded, and overwhelmed. We are being pulled in a million directions. But only one thing matters. One thing that will not be taken away from us.

It is easy, and often necessary, for us to tend to the demands and distractions of our lives. Being hospitable, being good welcomers and faithful servants, is an undeniably important part of our call as Christians. In a society that wishes to dictate who is welcome and who is not, a society that slams doors in the faces of God’s beloved people every day, we are charged with the difficult and joyful work of saying “come in. Sit down. Let us fix you a plate.” But sometimes, in our efforts to be good hosts, we forget that the party is not ours. In our efforts to welcome God’s least and lost, we forget that we too are lost and in need of Mercy. Mary understood something about Jesus that Martha needed help to see. Mary understood the one thing needful. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus because she understood that she was not the one to welcome him. Mary saw that she was not the host at this meal.

Every week, every time we gather in this space, and Father Michael stands at this altar and raises up the bread and wine and asks the holy Spirit to come upon them and make them the body and blood of Christ, we are being invited to a meal. I set the table, Michael breaks the bread and our servers share the wine. We are all serving, but none of us is the host. For these fleeting moments, surrounded on all sides by work and obligation and schedules and vacations and joys and sorrows, we are sitting at the feet of Jesus, we are invited to his table, and he shares with us the food of everlasting life. Like Mary, and I think like Martha too, we kneel at the feet of Jesus in this place, and for a moment, for once, nothing more is asked of us than that we are wholly ourselves. The great Anglican poet George Herbert wrote a poem that I think about every time I set this table in my role as a deacon, as a servant at a meal I am not worthy to host.

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:

Love said, You shall be he.

I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,

I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: So I did sit and eat.

The guest in this poem could be Martha. It could be you, or me. We are being invited to a feast by love himself, an invitation we receive every week, every day, every moment of our lives. We are being invited to sit, and eat.

Fellow servants of Christ, we are worried and distracted by so many things. Tonight, there is only one thing needed. Bring your whole self to the table. Sit, and eat.