

Amos 8:1-12

Psalm 52

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

Every single one of us arrives in this world with some natural talent or interest or proclivity for some activity in particular. Some people get here with natural talent for sports and they become both rich and famous because they can do what most other people can't. Others find that they love to write...and they do...and they produce wonderful, spelling binding bits of literature for us to enjoy. Some people seem to be drawn to music...to create it or to play an instrument so they can share it with others. There are still other people who have the gift of gab. They can entertain their friends and co-workers for hours at a time by telling outrageous stories that make everyone laugh. Each one of us has a talent of some kind. Sometimes that talent is obvious from the very start. At other times it seems to take a while to become obvious and flourish. But we all have some leaning toward some activity or way of being that seems integral to who we are. There are simply some things that come naturally to us. If we're lucky, we find out pretty early in life and we can figure out how to capitalize on what makes us unique. We can enter adulthood already knowing to some degree who we are.

For others of us, finding out who we are and where we fit into the scheme of things doesn't become obvious until we are adults. Our inclinations, attitudes, and values that seem to be so much a part of us may, in fact, simply be cultural standards that we have been maneuvered into whether we were interested or not. The story we heard this morning in our gospel lesson, might be one of those examples of someone being maneuvered into a particular role without questioning that destiny. Mary and Martha are two sisters who presumably grew up in the same household; were taught the same values; were met with the same expectations; developed the same skills and moved into adulthood without questioning any of it. The same may have happened to us depending on the culture into which we were born and the values of those around us. Did you ever wonder why you ended up with a long list of things you believed

you were supposed to do...or things you were taught you were supposed to believe? How many of you questioned what your adult life would be like when you were still adolescents? Did you think you had a choice? Most of us like to believe that we have a choice, but we may find out by experience that some things are barred from us for no other reason than our gender. That seems to be improving with every year that goes by, but men and women will never be completely equal. Some opportunities will be barred to each gender for reasons that may or may not make any sense.

But the choices of the two sisters we hear about today were pretty clear. Women had certain roles in life and men had certain other roles. For all our lives we've heard this story about Mary and Martha. Most of us know the story by heart, so what can we hear today that we may not have heard before? There is probably no other passage in the Bible that will stir up more controversy than this one! People are supposed to know their place and stay in it? Right? Well, not for us in the 21st century and apparently not in Jesus' time either. This particular scripture reading has stirred up more anger and controversy than any other passage in the Bible...it did then and it does now. But why? Why should this story stir up trouble? Because one of these women didn't know her place according to the customs and morés of the time. While gender barriers have been significantly altered, they are common enough for us to understand the nuances of this story.

Martha has taken on the traditional role of the lady of the house. She is preparing food for Jesus and his entourage. That's her 'job' as the female of this house. It is her duty to provide the hospitality that any Jewish household was expected to extend to visitors. Martha takes this responsibility very seriously. And on this particular occasion...with Jesus present...with a number of his disciples and followers...it seems to be even more important and the tasks seem grander than they usually are...more people to feed...more people to make comfortable...more people to welcome into this family setting. While the company is sitting around the floor surrounding Jesus and listening to his every word, Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus. It doesn't seem to bother her that this is not her 'place.' Her 'place' is in the kitchen with Martha helping

to make all the preparations for a larger than usual meal under their roof. Feeling the pressure of getting it all done, Martha complains to Jesus that Mary isn't helping her. Mary has left everything to Martha who is overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the moment and the importance of their guests. Martha wants Jesus to tell Mary to go into the kitchen and help her, but instead, he chides Martha just a bit. This doesn't sound like Jesus who rarely chides anyone. He explains that Mary has chosen the 'better' part by sitting at his feet and drinking in every word.

So what are we to make of this dilemma? Why is Jesus confirming Mary and criticizing Martha? Doesn't Martha have a point? Shouldn't Mary be helping her? Martha has put Jesus into an uncomfortable position by drawing him into what amounts to an intimate family quarrel. She has broken one of the cardinal rules of hospitality by drawing Jesus in...and he's not taking the bait. But why is he chiding Martha? Isn't she doing what she's supposed to be doing? Isn't Mary the one who is out of place? Listen closely to what Jesus says to Martha. He's not chiding her about wanting Mary to help. He's chiding her about being distracted and worried. She's taken her eyes off the prize which is Jesus sitting in the next room about to break bread with her family. Jesus' admonition to Martha is that despite all her worrying and distraction, there is only one thing that should occupy her attention: the word of God from the mouth of Jesus.

We all know what it feels like to be worried and overwhelmed. We can empathize with Martha. We may even think that Mary should have gotten up and gone into the kitchen to help Martha, but perhaps this is not an 'either/or' situation. Maybe this is a 'both and' situation. Stop and think for a minute what Jesus was doing in the other room. He was sharing the Word of God. If we have to choose what comes first, it would be the Word of God. It is important and it is what Mary chose and Jesus did say, "Mary has chosen the better part." But God's word is not the only thing that is important. God also requires that we be of service to others and that's exactly what Martha was doing. Stop and consider for a moment that what this scripture passage brings to us is the importance of the diakonos (which translates as 'service') as ministry and the importance of sharing the Word ('preaching') as ministry. Before the church has even taken

shape...before Jesus had confided in Peter that he will build his church around Peter...the two most important ministries in the church...service to others and preaching the Word...have been delineated for all of us.

This scripture passage about Martha and Mary is not a contest between which is more important. This passage is about the two forces within the church that spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in tangible and spiritual ways. You can't have one without the other. Both are important. The chiding that Martha got from Jesus was about her being worried and distracted. It wasn't because Jesus didn't think what she was doing was important. When we are serving others, there's no need to be worried or distracted. Caring for others is part of our Christian obligation just as sharing the Word of God is our Christian responsibility.

There is probably no other single Biblical passage that can cause an instantaneous squabble among the faithful in a church congregation than this one. We all need the 'Mary' in this passage and heaven knows we need the Martha in this passage as well. Jesus isn't chiding Martha for paying attention to hospitality. Surely Jesus knows that hospitality that flows freely makes people feel welcomed and important. It helps them form attachments within the church of their choice. It gives them a sense of belonging and a sense of being honored. What Jesus was chiding Martha about was that she was anxious and distracted. Those are two states of being that Jesus calls us to set aside in our service to him and to our worship of God the father. Trust in the Lord and in Jesus Christ is the bedrock of our faith. There's no room there for either distraction or anxiety.

In service to God in our care for others and our attention to the Word of God in scripture and study we are building and strengthening our relationships with God and with Jesus. And at the end of the day...when all is said and done...those two things are what Jesus tells us He wants us to focus on.

With the guidance from Jesus who teaches us continually and the support of God who loves us unconditionally , we can stay focused on what truly counts in our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. Both are vitally important. There's no room here for one being more important than the other.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.