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C: Fourth Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 16
Luke 10:38-42

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“The Better Part”

Many years ago in my first call a couple came to see me for counseling. They were in their late 40s or early 50s and had two children, the youngest of which had just graduated from college. As they entered my office, I could see that the woman's eyes were red from crying and the man's body and face were tense. The problem, it seemed was that the man had told his wife he wanted a divorce and the request had come to her totally out of the blue.

As far as she was concerned she'd been the perfect wife and mother – she'd spent her entire married life taking care of her husband and children. She had done everything because she loved him and she couldn't imagine what more she could have done. But from the man's point of view, she didn't love him at all. All she had ever cared about was taking care of the house and the kids. Yes she had done stuff for him, too, but all of that stuff could have been done by a maid or a secretary. From early on she hadn't had time to spend with him, she wasn't very affectionate, and she only ever talked about practical things. You could see that they had both tried their best to make the marriage work, but while she was content, he wasn't, and she hadn't even noticed.

In my next call, another couple came to see me, & altho' this time the roles were reversed, the story was basically the same.

In both situations, we discussed the 5 languages of love. Any of you know what they are? time spent together for no other reason than to be together, physical affection, words that convey affirmation and love, doing acts of service for the other person, and gifts

In both cases, the 2 individuals in the couple were speaking different languages – for 1 person it was almost entirely about serving; for the other it was almost entirely about communicating. For one it was more about doing; for the other it was more about being. For one it was about the task; for the other it was about the relationship.

And that's what we have in today's gospel reading. For Martha it's about serving, about doing, about the task; for Mary it's about communicating, about being, about the relationship.

The two task-oriented people in the marriages I described above were honestly convinced that they were showing their love by serving, but in actuality their serving was experienced by their partners as quite the opposite of love. The two relationship-oriented people felt like they were not as important as the tasks that were being done to supposedly show them they were loved.

They felt dismissed, and abandoned, and unloved.

Lutherans are known for being a “both and” people.

We don't like to make choices and we are proud of saying we are able to live with paradox.

Whenever I've preached on this in the past I've held up Mary and Martha as simply two different ways of being Christian.

Yet as I listened to three Lutheran theologians wrestle with the text this week,

it became obvious to me what was making them uncomfortable and what I had failed or refused to see before: one little word: “better”, as in Jesus' words, “Mary has chosen the better part”.

The problem is that we in the western world live in a Martha society.

We could better describe ourselves as “human doings” rather than “human beings”.

We value work and achievement and success.

If someone has less than we do, we are quick to point out that they should work harder if they expect to have more.

We devalue old people, and people with disabilities,

seeing them not for what they can contribute to society, but for how they are a drain on it.

In too many corporations it's all about the bottom line, about the task, about how much the employee can produce.

We live in a Martha society and to some extent we are all products of it,
which is why it's so very hard to hear what Jesus says in today's story.
When Martha complains to Jesus that Mary is wasting time with Jesus,
just sitting there at his feet and listening to him instead of helping her with her tasks,
Jesus doesn't hold the two ways of relating to him as equal.
Instead he says clearly that Mary has chosen the better part.
Serving may be good, but communing/communicating is better.
Doing may be good, but being is better.
Accomplishing tasks may be good, but building relationship is better.

Let me be clear: I'm speaking as much to myself as to you,
for we in our western world and in our mainline Protestant church have been socialized to be Marthas.
We are about doing things for God or for other people, rather than simply spending time with God
or hanging out with those we serve in order to get to know them and learn from them.
We are about accomplishing tasks, rather than about praising God or learning to speak in ways that build up people.
And even when we do spend time at church or give money to church,
it's often more out of a sense of obligation or duty than of love.
When it comes to the choice between task or relationship, the Bible is clear: it's about the relationship.
What is the greatest commandment?
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your body.
And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.
That's where it must begin: with the relationship, with the heart, with love.
Service without love does not please God, and in the end service without love is meaningless.

To all of us Martha-type disciples, Jesus speaks the hard truth with infinite love:
Mary has chosen the better part. Mary has chosen the better part.
What God, what Jesus desires is that we prioritize spending time with him.
What God, what Jesus desires is that we tell him
how awesome he is, how much we love him, & how grateful we are for all he's done for us.
What God, what Jesus desires is that we show physical expression –
expressing our love with our bodies by singing or clapping or dancing or cheering.
What God desires is that the gifts we offer come not merely from a sense of obligation,
but from a heart overflowing with love.
What God desires is that the service we offer arises not from our good intentions,
but from the clear direction of the Holy Spirit.

Martha had good intentions – she wanted to offer her guest hospitality.
And yet despite her good intentions, she was so anxious and troubled and resentful and angry
that she ended up throwing all of her negative emotions at Jesus,
when in reality she need not have worried about the meal at all –
for surely had she wanted to sit at Jesus' feet with her sister,
the man who had fed 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread could have managed to feed their small household.

To me and to all the other Marthas in the mainline Protestant church and in our western society, God in Jesus says;
Mary has chosen the better part. You choose the better part, too. Spend more time with me.
Praise me for who I am. Thank me for all I do. Tell me you love me. Tell me that you know that I love you.
There will be things that need doing, but they are not for you to do without me. They are for me to do through you.
Because as much as I love you, dear child, it's about more than just you.
It's about all that I have made, and all that I love, and all that I have planned.
You have a unique and crucial part to play – and no one can take your place. But you can't do it without me.
So let's plan on spending time together, talking, listening, getting to know one another.
Don't worry about the work. Don't be troubled about the tasks. Don't be distracted by so much doing.
Just come into my presence, and let my love surround you and my power amaze you.
Yes, my dear child, be like Mary. And choose the better part. Amen