

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 21, 2013
Pentecost 9
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 18:1-14
Psalm 15
Colossians 1:21-29
Luke 10:38-42

Last week's Gospel lesson -- the story of the "Good Samaritan" -- would have had some serious "shock value" to its original audience because of the image the disciples had of the Samaritans in their minds.

Today's Gospel lesson also has some "shock value," but this time it's because of the social conventions that are violated by Jesus.

This is a short little story about two sisters, Mary and Martha. But before we get to them, we need to understand just how radical this story is, especially to those who first heard it.

The story tells us of Jesus being welcomed into a home and receiving the customary hospitality from that home. It sounds ordinary enough, until we realize that this was the home of a woman. Luke mentions nothing to us about a brother.

It would have been unusual enough for Jesus to be received into the home of a woman, but even more striking is the fact that in that day, rabbis did not allow women to "sit at their feet," that is, to become disciples. It simply was not done.

But *this* rabbi does.

Luke makes it clear that Jesus has no problem with women being numbered among the disciples.

One of the most frequent criticisms leveled at Christianity and the Scriptures by its opponents is that the Bible perpetuates a world view that marginalizes and oppresses women.

Well, perhaps those who've interpreted the Scriptures have done so at times. But Jesus never did. In these few verses Jesus bashes much of the social and theological convention of the day, and by his actions affirms the calling of women as full members of his covenant community.

Now let's look at the text itself. What is happening here in this story of these two sisters?

If we isolate this text and look only at the immediate story, we can easily distort its significance and miss much of its meaning. We might be tempted to turn the story into an allegory, where we classify Mary as the contemplative and reflective Christian, while assigning to Martha the title of the active, busy Christian. And we might be further tempted to downplay the role of activism while unduly elevating the role of contemplation and reflection.

Such characterizations are far too simplistic, I believe.

Instead, it is wiser to see this story as inseparably connected to the story that has preceded it -- the story of the religious lawyer and the Good Samaritan.

In that story, you recall, Jesus meets a religious lawyer who has trouble hearing the Word of God. So Jesus tells him the story of the Samaritan, and then he tells him, “go and do” (likewise).

Here, in this story of the two sisters, Jesus now meets a woman having difficulty hearing the Word of God. So to her, he says in effect, “stop, sit down, listen, and learn.”

Martha’s complaint seems reasonable enough. She wants her sister to help her. But Jesus’ response isn’t entirely clear. Manuscripts render verse 42 in different ways. It is hard to know if Jesus is telling Martha that she is preparing too many dishes, or if he is saying that the one essential dish or portion is the Word of God.

The apparent meaning is that the Word of God and not food is the only essential portion or thing needed, for remember that we do not live on bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3).

At any rate, the essential message of this text to us can only be found by pairing it with what has come before in the story of the Samaritan.

You’ll recall that the issue with the religious lawyer involved what one must do to inherit eternal life. And the answer was: love God, love your neighbor.

The story of the Samaritan, and then the story of Mary and Martha, serve to illumine this focus on the Great Commandments. That is, the Samaritan is an example of loving our neighbor. Mary, then, becomes an example of loving God.

Luke is not showing us that the Martha's of the world are bad and the Mary's of the world are good, or even that the Martha's are good and the Mary's are better. He is simply affirming that in the Christian life, there are times when it's important to "go and do," and other times when it's important to "stop, sit, reflect, and listen."

Both the Samaritan and Mary are models for us to emulate. *Our task as disciples is to discern which is which, and when.* This is not always easy. It requires great sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in the specific circumstances of our lives.

Striking this balance between activism and reflection, between the "go and do" of the Christian life and the "stop and think" of the Christian life, is indeed difficult. But we must work at it, because if we don't the results will fall on either side of two extremes. If we focus solely on activism, then there will come times when what we have is misguided and misdirected zeal. And if we focus exclusively on reflection and contemplation, there will come times when all we have is irrelevant knowledge.

New Testament scholar Fred Craddock cautions us as we listen to this story

of Mary and Martha:

We should not cartoon this scene: Martha to her eyeballs in soapsuds, Mary pensively on a stool in the den, and Jesus giving Scriptural warrant for letting dishes pile high in the sink. If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect...If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be 'Yes'. [Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990, p. 152]

In a sense, then, it's almost as if Jesus is saying: "Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. As an example of the latter I give you the Samaritan; as an example of the former, I give you Mary."

As we prepare to come to the Table of the Lord this morning, may the Holy Spirit be at work in our lives, guiding us and leading us, so that our zeal may always be informed by knowledge, and that our active pursuit of justice be tempered by wisdom, common sense, and the spirit of Jesus' life and ministry.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.