

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Genesis 18:1-10a

Luke 10:38-42

Hosting Jesus

It might surprise you but I find this Gospel passage a little scary to preach on. I thought about avoiding it but try as I might I kept being led back to it. And then I was reminded the gospel isn't always supposed to be comfortable, comforting but not always easy so I have decided to give it an attempt.

You may recall that in the last few weeks in our scriptures we have been walking with Jesus towards Jerusalem. In our text two weeks ago Jesus and his disciples turned towards Jerusalem in a pivotal moment of ministry. From this point on Jesus is helping to clarify for the disciples what a life of loving God and neighbour really looks like. And so they began this part of the journey by entering into a Samaritan village where they were promptly rejected. They discovered that not everyone is ready for transforming life changing news. And then last week Carol preached about a very different kind of Samaritan the kind who let go of the stereotypes and lived out of courage and hospitality rather than his marginalized status.

Now I have no desire to go back over what Carol already covered because I know she did a fine job but each week builds on the last so we are going to recap just a little especially for those of us who might have missed a Sunday or two in the sunshine recently.

The first thing I noticed as I began to correlate these scriptures was that Jesus is up to his old teaching tricks again.

Isn't it just like him to immediately following an experience of rejection by the Samaritans to then choose to tell a story about a Samaritan who is full of compassion and knows the meaning of neighbor. Jesus is responding to both his disciples pride and the question of a legal expert who wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answers with a law the man would know intimately because devote Jewish people would recite it daily. Marcus Borg translates it: These are the two great "relationships" to love God with your whole heart and soul and strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.

It seems Jesus cares deeply about relationships. The heart of his good news is about our relationship with God and with one another. The story of the Good Samaritan teaches us what it means to love our neighbor and the story we read today teaches us about loving God. But when we miss the transition of the text the Martha and Mary story is easily misunderstood or interpreted.

The Mary, Martha story is scary to preach about because I can hear all the voices of the women and men that do the work of the church saying why don't you appreciate me? Sure it's easy to sit and pray but somebody's got to cook the meal and do the dishes. I know people laugh at the pastor when they say "lets just have a simple meal." "Easy for you to say, your not doing the work" is the response you really want to give isn't it.

When I read this passage I think about all the wonderful people who do the work of the church in the kitchens, fellowship halls, buildings and centers all around the world. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we could not do ministry without them. I was reminded when I was writing this that in Smithers I offered to do coffee after church a couple times because nobody else wanted to do it and there were coffee time battles that I was attempting to squelch. Amazingly enough after my second attempt volunteers began to come out of the woodwork. Believe me you don't want me doing that piece of the Sunday work. Mainly because it's guaranteed to be set out later than you want it. I can almost guarantee it ended up being more work for more people as we attempted to get the tea and coffee out as fast as possible. Also amazing was that we discovered there were people with those gifts who wanted to help but didn't want to get in the way of those who had been doing it for so long.

As one commentator reflected if all our doers decided to take this story at face value and sit down, right when we needed them to be pouring coffee and putting out baked goods or fixing the toilets. What would happen to coffee times, church potlucks, funeral teas and, by extension, gathering of food for those less fortunate or our work to care for the world? And what about the ministry of hospitality? Greeters and such. How would people feel if no one ever said hello or welcomed you in?

"Is that what this story of Mary and Martha means – that sitting and listening and praying and learning are more important than cooking the meal, fixing a broken something or laying out the

welcome mat? No pastor in her right mind would suggest such a thing, and I don't believe it's what Jesus is saying, either.”¹

I believe Jesus is teaching us about faithfulness, about how to listen to God. Eternal life is about living in God's spirit and both the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of Martha and Mary give us direction towards that end. “The story about the Good Samaritan taught us about loving our neighbor, and today's story ...is about loving God.” It's about hosting Jesus by taking time to recognize his desires for our lives rather than focusing on our desires to direct what God should be doing or being in our world. I believe Jesus is saying with these two stories that all our efforts and deeds are to be balanced and even nourished by times of simply sitting and being with God.

As usual the gospel is counter cultural. We have two people from the fringes of society (a Samaritan and a woman) who are acting out of character. The Samaritan is caring for an oppressor and a woman is daring to take the position of a disciple at the feet of the teacher. Both of these stories include a bold faith that refuses to live according to societies rules. Mary is actually being less passive than one might think. She is being bold enough to believe Jesus would want to teach her and be with her. She has enough courage to believe she is worthy of listening and being taught. Perhaps this story is meant to empower us to believe that the Holy has a message for us. And that we have a right and responsibility to listen to it. Jesus was reminding Martha that she was more than a 'doer' she was a child of God. And the Holy had a longing to spend time with her.

Kate Huey wrote “If that was a shocking thing for Jesus to say to a woman who was trying to meet the expectations her society had set for her, not to mention the radically counter-cultural message that a woman could sit at the feet of the master like any male disciple and learn from him, can we begin to imagine how disconcerting such a idea is for us, in our culture today? We live in a world that seems to equate busyness with importance, and a long to-do list, especially when it's finally completed, gives us a sense of satisfaction and even security...at least, until we start on a new list of tasks to be completed. Our days are full, one after another, of many things, and our minds are full and overflowing, worried and distracted, like Martha, by many things. But Henri Nouwen once wrote that our lives, while full, are often unfulfilled. "Our occupations and

¹ Huey, Kate sermon from 2007 found on textweek.com (I appreciated her reflection and used much of it for this sermon.)

preoccupations," he said, "fill our external and internal lives to the brim. They prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives."²

Can you imagine what life would be like, without all of the things that keep us busy? Perhaps during the summer that is a little easier to grasp but even though we may take a rest I know I still have a mind that races with all there is to do by such and such a date. Can you imagine time for our internal lives, hours spent in being with God, abiding with God, in tending our relationship with God, listening to the quiet still voice of God speaking to us, deep within our hearts?

While I was in Fredericton a few weeks back we were sent on a walk with one other member of the group to talk about what we do with our best time. It was hard to not turn the conversation into what we do with all our time. As Tim and I talked I found myself longing for time with God. Time to just be with the Holy. I found myself telling him about a season of my life when I lived in Switzerland and I somehow found balance there. Each and every day I went for a prayer walk. Eventually my prayers moved from the lists of wants and desires to an ability to just be. I remember sitting in the middle of a field one day on a rock and it started to rain. I was at such peace that I actually consider the rain to be showers of blessings and I soaked up each drop as a gift from The Holy. Tim told me that every muscle in my face softened as I told that story. We pondered why it is that we don't take as much time for wholeness as we should.

I think it is because we rarely allow for the time. It is for this reason that I often incorporate times of silence in a service. I have heard more than once from people that it is their favorite time because it is the only moment of quiet they get all week. It is a moment for us to Make room for the Spirit of God to breathe freely in us, and thus renew our lives.

It seems to me that it is essential for us to stop sometimes to hear God still speaking - even in our post-christendom world. Kate Huey asked "How can the Stillspeaking God get a word in edgewise over the beepers, cell phones, voicemail, television, and radio messages that bombard us? How can we tend to our internal lives like careful gardeners who spend time nurturing new growth, pulling weeds when necessary, and gently showering the thirsty green plants with refreshing water?"

It is all too easy, in our personal lives and in our churches, to decide that we know what is needed, and what is to be done, without taking the time stop and to listen. It is all too easy to

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speaking, without taking the time to hear carefully and prayerfully, what God's message for us really is, or what the stories of those we seek to serve really are. If we are to be a people who bring Christ's grace and justice into our communities, we will need to listen carefully, and then act justly, compassionately and with integrity in response. We will need to avoid the temptation to assume we know what our communities need, and we will need to resist the urge to see ourselves as 'saviors' coming in to 'fix' things 'for' those who 'need' us. Rather we will need to adopt the humility of Mary, and the hospitality of the Samaritan as we come alongside people listening and living the Gospel message.

Once again Jesus has chosen the most unlikely candidates to teach us. A Samaritan and a woman teach us about the balance of hearing and doing. If we never stop long enough to listen to God or each other than we will likely miss the message. If we miss the message than our lives and the lives we are trying to serve will remain unfulfilled. We will encounter anything but eternal fullness of life.

I would like to end with a prayer written by John van deLaar

If there is anything we need to learn,
it's to listen, God;
In the midst of so many words
telling us who 'we' are and who 'they' are,
and what 'the real problem' is,
directing and misdirecting us,
recruiting us
and selling all manner of things to us,
we can start to believe you've gone silent.

But, if we can still the noise around us and within us,
take the time to sit at your feet,
and embrace the humility required to hear,
we will discover that you whisper still,
within us, and through our neighbours,
in cries of need, and the silence of grief,
and then, once he have heard your word,
we will know how to live the truth

you have so gently spoken.

May our hearts and ears be open to hear your spirit call.

Amen.