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The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd
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Year C – Proper 11

Sanctify us O Lord in truth, your Word is Truth.

63... This is not a number that typically stands out. This is not a particularly holy number. In fact some might have called it an unholy number at least at certain points last week. 63 is the number of campers at a session of summer camp at Camp Allen last week. I had the privilege of joining another priest who is a friend from seminary, 6 college staff members, 15 cabin counselors, and of course 63 fifth and sixth grade campers. Camp is always an exciting week but I was blown away by one thing in particular. It was the good work that our youth and college students in the diocese of Texas are doing as summer staff and cabin counselors. They give up all or part of their summer in order to serve these children. The days are long. The activities are many. The excitement is high. And through all of this, these staff members work hard to create an extraordinary week for each camper. I often stopped and asked myself how do they do it? Then the answer would be clear: a moment of worship, a smiling child, a glimpse of beauty. These were the breaks in the activities, the moments to slow down. It was as if they were at the foot of Jesus being renewed.

Sort of like Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

The story of Mary and Martha is one that has sparked years of discussion and debate. And when I hear this story I immediately think, "Poor Martha, she always gets a bad rap." Martha is the kind of woman who is busily buzzing around the house getting everything ready for her honored guests. In many ways, she reminds me of my own mom. I think it is natural to relate with Martha. Her actions are similar to the ones we do today when we host someone. In fact this sort of hospitality is a hallmark of a Jewish home. When a traveler arrived you didn't send them to the Hilton. No, you gave up your bed, brought out only the best, and shared everything. Now, Martha has finally had it with doing more than her fair share. She has spent all day slaving in the kitchen preparing food for her guest and she has had enough. Exasperated, she turns to her teacher for help to get Mary to finally come relieve some of the hosting burdens.

With our modern eyes it is hard to see in all of this that this story is full of scandal. First, Jesus has gone into the home of women. This gospel does not mention brother, father, or husband. Today we think nothing of this but to the people of Jesus' time this was a *scandal*. To add to this, Jesus begins teaching Mary who sits at his feet like a pupil. A Pharisee or traditional Jewish teacher of that time would do no such thing. Only men were invited to sit at the feet of the teacher in the position of the student or disciple. Luke is specifically pointing out that both women and men are disciples of Jesus and equals in the service and worship of Christ. The third scandal of the story happens when Martha draws her honored guest, the one she is working so hard for, into a family dispute. All she was doing was looking for a little back-up but what she got was not what she bargained for... instead of praising Martha for her good work and inviting her to take a break, Jesus praises Mary!

If you look closely at the text, at no point does Jesus deny the value of what Martha is doing. This is because the work that Martha was doing was necessary work. Rather, Jesus says that there is more than just work. There is sitting before his feet and being refreshed by his words. Christ wants Martha to slow down and let her mind and soul catch up with her body. I doubt Mary made it a practice to sit at the feet of guest in order to be taught. In fact as I said earlier, women weren't allowed to do that at that time. Rather she did it because it was Christ and she was his disciple.

All of this leads to that old question over whether you are a "Mary" or a "Martha." When we look at the question we see that it is an invalid question. The question the gospel poses was never "are you a Mary or a Martha" but rather... are you a Mary and a Martha? And then do you know when to be one or the other? Each moment in life calls for a different approach. Sometimes we are called to work and to serve. Other times we are to sit at the feet of our Lord and simply listen as he speaks to us. Both of these should be incorporated in our daily lives. Neither is complete without the other.

Within the gospel we are given two clues that tell us that this moment in the story was a moment to sit before Christ. First in chapter nine of Luke's Gospel, we are told that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. This marks the beginning of a large portion of what Luke called the journey narrative. As soon as Jesus sets his sights upon Jerusalem everything else Jesus does in the gospel of Luke is in the context of moving toward Jerusalem... to the cross... to death that will lead to life. That means each step made, each word spoken, each action taken is one closer to the cross. In this journey narrative, everything Jesus does carries greater weight and intensity. Jesus demands more in the call to discipleship and begins to prepare his followers for what is to come. In other words, it is time to listen.

The second clue we are given that this is a time to sit before Christ rather than busy oneself with service is the fact that Luke is answering a part of the question that was actually raised in last week's gospel reading. You might remember that directly preceding the Mary/Martha story a lawyer asks what one must do to have eternal life. Jesus turns the question back to the man and the lawyer responds with a good Jewish answer: one must love God and neighbor. Then the man asks Jesus who is my neighbor and Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan. In the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells us what it looks like to love our neighbor. Here with the story of Mary and Martha the gospel of Luke paints a picture of what it means to love God. These stories are the beautiful paradox of discipleship. All disciples are to be both active and contemplative. We are to sit at the feet of Jesus as well as be active in the world. We are not to choose a character but rather to live into the fullness of each.

In the end, this story is a story of the ordinary becoming extraordinary. It is a story of priorities and how we begin with Christ in our lives. It is a story of our worship. For it reminds us that what happens in our churches- whether they be our our prayers, our readings, our teachings, our fellowship, and our breaking bread- is not for entertainment or busying ourselves. Rather it is slowing down, sitting at Jesus' feet, and receiving from him faith, hope, and love. Then we will go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.