

Sunday July 18, 2004
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

“BUT THEN WHO WILL?”

Text:
Luke 10:38-42

Someone once said, “There are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don’t.”

Most of us fall into the first category. Sometimes unconsciously and sometimes quite deliberately, we look at the world as being divided in two. In the end it comes down to those who are like us and those who are not. Sometimes the division contains both wisdom and humor, as in the Yiddish observation that the world is divided into schlemiels and schlemazzles. The schlemiel always manages to spill soup on someone; the schlemazzle always finds himself in the way of falling soup. But sometimes the separation is worrisome, as is some of the language that is emerging as the presidential election process moves forward. There’s a lot of us-ing and them-ing in the country right now, and that should give Christians a good deal of concern. Us versus them always leads to conflict, to anger, to misunderstanding and, as we cannot help noting in many parts of the world, to intractable cycles of violence and bloodshed. Us versus them always makes them not as good as us, or even less human than us. We will always feel more of an affinity for us, and it will always be an effort to treat them with complete justice and equity. This is true across the board, from presidential politics to gay and lesbian issues to zoning and land use issues in a community to the irritations and misunderstandings which occur between the generations. Our differences remain; the job for

Christians is to be aware of the differences and to be as mindful as we possibly can as to what we intend to do about them and how we intend to respond to them day by day by day.

Jesus walked into a very familiar state of affairs when he went to visit his friends Mary and Martha. Martha was the one who opened the door and welcomed Jesus in and then set about tidying up and fixing a meal and all the other things which hospitality and friendship ask of us in any age and in any culture. Mary, on the other hand, sat by Jesus eagerly taking in everything he had to say. There are Marys and there are Marthas in every family – they need not be women; indeed, there may be a Mary and a Martha living in a single person. The thing that makes this story hard to hear is that Jesus clearly prefers Martha to Mary. Martha, not unreasonably, complains that Mary is monopolizing their guest, and besides she needs help. Mary and Martha have been through this before; they are no different from any other family. They are caught up in patterns of behavior and relationship that are so ingrained that they become part of the fabric of their days. Martha knows perfectly well that she can ask Mary to help, but Mary will always be doing something else, something utterly impractical, something that places her completely beyond her sister's voice – her older sister, I'm sure.

So Martha appeals to Jesus.

Imagine the scene. Mary is sitting staring up at Jesus taking in not only his words but his energy and his compelling personality. She is excited to be close to him. And in comes Martha, with an exasperated look on her face, and says, "Look, tell my sister to get off her butt and come give me a hand. We have work to do!"

Here it is: us versus them.

Now, the thing about Jesus is that he never does what we would expect. Martha has a perfectly good point. And I am certain that many of us have acted

out similar scenes in our own families. It's not fair for Mary to be slacking off and leaving all the family responsibilities in her sister's care. But Jesus takes Mary's side, of all things. He gently chides Martha for her busyness and tells her to back off.

Jesus said many things during his ministry that are hard to hear and difficult to understand. Pray for your enemies, for instance. Turn the other cheek. It's harder for the rich to get into heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Sell everything you have. But I think that his words to Martha may be the hardest words he ever spoke. We're not talking about moral and ethical principles here, nor about how to live our lives. In the midst of this familiar domestic scene, Jesus is praising the irresponsible sister at the expense of the dutiful sister. We don't raise our kids to be Marys; we raise them to be Marthas. We hope they'll major in useful subjects that will ensure them a secure and comfortable life. We make sure they don't miss music lessons or soccer practice. We engage in the uphill, frustrating task of trying to get them to clean their rooms. We want them to have a sense of responsibility. If they go mooning around like Mary, we worry – maybe there's a need for professional help.

How come Mary is the favored sister? It's not only unfair; it's subversive.

But let's assume – and it's a pretty safe assumption – that Jesus knew what he was saying and meant what he said. Forget for a while that his words are difficult for many of us – or, if we number ourselves among the Marys of this world, that we've just been vindicated. Suppose that Martha was busy straightening things up so that the house would be fit for company. Jesus is saying, Martha, I don't care if the place has a lived-in look. I came to see you, not the house. Suppose Martha was busy in the kitchen. Jesus is saying, Martha if you're feeling swamped we'll both come in and give you a hand. Jesus is saying what he so often says in so many ways: it's people that matter, it's relationships that matter – sure, rules are important but there are things more important than rules and those are the things which draw us close to the mind and the heart of God. The point is that Martha was “worried and distracted by many things”.

I would dearly love it if someone told me that I was worried and distracted by many things – and that I had to good sense to listen. Martha was so busy getting things ready for her guest and friend that she was ignoring Jesus. She was trying so hard to do the right thing that she was missing out on the important thing.

And if there is anything that you and I need help with, it is in discerning the difference between the right thing and the important thing. Martha's mantra was, "If I don't do it, who will"? To which Jesus' implied answer was, "Martha, don't worry. It'll get done. Come over here and sit down and join the conversation." In this humble, domestic setting, Jesus is speaking powerful words of liberation. In one of our great paradoxes as people of faith, the right thing might not really be the right thing. The question Jesus was always asking was: What is the important thing? What is it that really matters?

You and I live busy, demanding lives. We were educated that way, we were brought up that way, it's what we expect of ourselves and what other people expect of us. Jesus is asking us in this story of Martha and Mary what it is that we are really doing with our time and with our energies. Martha was driven; clearly she didn't want to be doing what she was doing. Jesus tells her that she doesn't have to. Like so many of us, Martha had lost sight of the difference between doing and living. One of the most important things that a church exists for is to nourish us for living, to make us aware of what we're doing so that we can choose what to do. We all have duties and responsibilities and people who depend on us. But all this remains out of reach if we are joyless and driven. I was talking with a friend the other day who had been traveling for two weeks because that's what the job required. Coming home meant eight or ten hour days in the office. I wondered: "How do you do it?" And on a deeper level I asked myself, "Should you really be doing this?" I was talking with Martha, surely.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that my friend ought to throw over the job and do something less outrageously demanding. The problem is that once

you're Martha, you really are Martha and there is no way out. In my friend's case, there's a Lexington mortgage and college tuitions and the expense of all the things that people who move to a community like this must pay for. And, besides, even demanding jobs can energize us if they draw on things we're good at and trained for and like doing. But the question remains: what will bring Martha to Jesus, to sit beside her sister and create not a social event but a visit? The house won't clean itself, nor the meal cook itself. It's not that Martha is wrong. But is life a chore or a gift? Don't think that any of us can answer that question quickly – not if we're honest. Martha did not become Martha overnight; and if all there were in this life were Marys, the world would come to a grinding halt.

Martha was one of those people who manage to be upset that she gets no help but still feels the need to do it all by herself. Her inability to let go made her life narrower and less happy than it might have been. But letting go is not a simple thing. Letting go involves trust, and trust does not come easily. If we leave the kitchen and all the domestic chores to go and sit and listen to Jesus, what's to keep everything from falling apart?

None of us can put the Christian faith into practice without having our lives change – that is largely what keeps religion a spectator sport for so many. It is comforting to watch it happen, to listen to familiar words and observe familiar rituals and holidays and such, to know that there are people who do, in fact, keep faith's flame burning in their lives. But are we sure that we can do that, too? It's a good idea, religion. But what happens to us if we say our prayers and get to know the Bible better and begin to wonder where and how God is at work in our lives? The world needs Martha – there's work to be done, after all. But what if Martha is killing herself with stress, overwork, an inflated sense of her importance in the scheme of things, an underdeveloped sense of life as God's gift?

Jesus didn't scold Martha; he felt sorry for her, she made him sad. Jesus came into her house and, while it is clear that they were friends, and Mary and

Martha do appear elsewhere in the Gospel narratives, Jesus was a problem for Martha. He came asking things of her that she could not understand. She wanted to feed him and make him comfortable and make him glad that he'd come. But Jesus wanted to sit down and have a good talk about important things – about the things that made Jesus, Jesus.

In the end, I think this story is about change and expectation. My over-busy friend, traveling long distances and laboring long hours, is not about to give it all up. But suppose that there was more of Mary and less of Martha? Jesus is saying that there is always time for the important things; but sometimes the important things aren't what we think they are. Sometimes the important things are so small that we don't notice them. Faith is first of all about *noticing*. Even in my friend's busy life there are quiet moments: how should they be filled? I know someone who begins every day with a question: "What do you want of me today, God?" Who tries to say a prayer before every meeting. Who even says grace over airplane food. I know someone who looks forward to red lights, because the time standing still is a time for a word or a single sentence of prayer. I know someone who will not let a week pass without quietly and deliberately helping somebody – sometimes a kind word, or the gift of time to listen, nothing fancy. People in other words who manage to be Mary even as the world, and they themselves, expect them to be Martha.

It can be done.

Not only that, it has to be done.

Most of us are quite used to that part of us that is Martha – the idea of not being Martha makes some of us, at least, very anxious. Yet Jesus told Mary that she had "chosen the better part". The better part was to sit and listen. The point is not to set out to rearrange our lives from top to bottom all in one go. That simply will not work. But every one of us has time – every one of us has a place to begin. Sitting at a stop light. Waking up in the morning. Waiting to pick somebody up. Sitting, if you please, with a tray of airline food there in front of

you. Mary had the best part because the best part begins with sitting still. Martha's urgent question intrudes: if I don't do it, who will? And Jesus' answer is this: trust that you are loved. There will be plenty of time for supper, and I'm not going to peek into your closets or look for dust bunnies in the corners. Now, come over here with Mary and me and sit down.

Thanks be to God.