**9 Pentecost**

**July 17, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the Power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

I’ve always had a hard time with the story of Martha and Mary. Martha is the one doing the cooking, setting the table, arranging the flowers. Mary is the one that is swooning over Jesus … listening to his every word. Martha wants to make a good impression, but Mary is so taken with this man that she is oblivious to the tasks that are calling for her attention. Martha is self-righteous in her hustle and bustle and assumes Jesus is on her side … she asks Jesus to scold Mary and get her to begin doing her share of the work. Instead, Jesus … in his gentle way … reprimands Martha for being so distracted, and then affirms Mary for just being still and listening.

Now, with all due respect for all those who work so hard to give us Coffee Hour after service each Sunday, I want to say that it not an either/or, but rather a both/and. There would be no story without both Martha and Mary … they need each other to be complete. So for those of you … who like me … tend towards being more Martha we need to make room for Mary. And those of you who identify with Mary … it is time to get off your duff and do something.

Maybe I have a problem with this story because I’m more of a Martha type person. I like to be busy. I like accomplishing projects … seeing results. I’m a multi-tasker. I’ve told people that my job is like one of those jugglers we used to see on the old Ed Sullivan Show … the jugglers with plates spinning on long sticks and just about the time the juggler gets a dozen plates spinning at the same time he looks back at the first plate and it is about to fall off and he goes running down the table to get it spinning again. I think that most people who know me realize this.

I have a hard time just sitting a reading a book … no matter how good the book is. I like listening to music, but usually while doing something else. I like watching a beautiful sunset, but once the sun goes over the horizon I’m ready for the next thing.

So, when I read this story I’m a little uncomfortable. I think I am more Martha than Mary and I would like the story better if Martha got credit for the work she was doing, and Mary was chastised at least a little for just loafing off.

Almost 30 years ago I attended a retreat at a place called Four Springs in northern California. Along with a dozen or so other participants I was stuck on a hillside outside of Napa Valley for seventeen days. The focus of the retreat was working with the story of Jesus as told in the gospels. During the retreat there were group seminars, experiential activities, art expressions, and long periods of silence. After the first week I met with my spiritual director and she asked me a question, “Why do you fill your silent times with other things? What are you afraid to hear your spirit say to you?”

It had never occurred to me that, like Martha, I was distracting myself as a way of avoiding listening … listening to myself and listening to my spirit … or God’s Spirit. If I couldn’t listen to my spirit on this retreat I certainly wasn’t going to listen to it when I wasn’t on retreat. I found being still like Mary very difficult. Trying to quiet my mind enough to just listen to another voice in my head was very hard. But it was also profound. It changed my life. I wouldn’t be the person I am today if I hadn’t stopped the distracting chatter in my head and in the silence heard a voice I had not heard since childhood.

I had learned about Four Springs and this retreat from a friend and colleague in North Carolina where I was living at the time. It was a couple of years after my son had been disabled in an auto accident. My friend had come to the hospital when Christopher was still in a coma. He noticed that I showed up each day in the ICU waiting room wearing my clerical collar and a suit or blazer. One day he pulled me aside. He said, “You look like you are wearing a suit of armor. What are you trying to protect yourself from?” Obviously, it was the pain and vulnerability and fear. I was afraid to really feel, so I was doing my best to shield myself from that possibility.

Then, several years later, I was at this place called Four Springs and being confronted with a similar question. Why, like Martha, was I allowing … or causing … these distractions to keep me from listening? What was I afraid to hear? It had been a long time since I had heard such a voice. Would that voice be my own, or the voice of God’s Spirit? Is there a difference? Would I even recognize it was my own? What might happen if I did listen to that voice?

Some people construe the story of Martha and Mary as the tension between the contemplative life and the active life … the monastic life or a life of social activism … between prayer on the one hand and doing on the other … with a definite bias in this story to the contemplative/prayerful life. But I think that is a false dichotomy. I don’t believe there is any reason to pit action against contemplation. We need both, and I believe God calls people to both. Instead of contrasting the active and contemplative styles of life, Luke contrasts Martha's "distracted" life … a word he uses twice … with Mary's "centered" life.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton spent twenty-seven years cloistered in Gethsemane Monastery in rural Kentucky. His monastic life of silence and prayer invigorated his prophetic writings that spoke to the entire world … and that turned him into a paradoxical silent speaker and celebrity in solitude. His solitude and contemplation fostered engagement with the world rather than an escape from reality.

Luke tells the story of Martha and Mary and Jesus as a real world encounter involving three people. However, I also think that the story of Martha and Mary is about an inner struggle … an inner struggle that we all have experienced. In our lives we have all been visited by a “guest” of sorts that has the potential to lead us to a fuller life. Yet, often, we are so distracted by other things that we fail to take the time to stop and listen to what that “guest” may have to say. Perhaps we are afraid to listen, so we allow the distractions to fill our psyche. Perhaps we know that what we will hear may be painful so we avoid that voice by allowing other voices in our head and heart to speak instead. But this story is telling us there is value in quieting our souls and minds, becoming centered, listening to the “guest” … even if it is your own voice, and then moving into meaningful action.

I know from personal experience that listening is not easy. Dag Hammarskjold was the Swedish Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 until he was killed in a plane crash in 1961. He was a world traveler and also an author of some note. He once famously observed that the longest journey is the journey inward. In our age of total information overload, it's “no small struggle” to move from the experience of Martha … distracted, agitated, and anxious about all going on around her … to Mary's quiet, centered self, focused on what is going on in her heart and soul.

I have read this poem from the pulpit before, and it is familiar to many of you, but I like to pull it out every so often. It reminds me of both where I have been and what I have to listen to as I continue to seek a life that takes seriously what Jesus took seriously. The poem is “The Journey” by Mary Oliver:

**The Journey**

One day you finally knew

what you had to do, and began,

though the voices around you

kept shouting

their bad advice –

though the whole house

began to tremble

and you felt the old tug

at your ankles.

“Mend my life!”

each voice cried.

But you didn’t stop.

You knew what you had to do,

though the wind pried

with its stiff fingers

at the very foundations –

though their melancholy

was terrible.

It was already late

enough, and a wild night,

and the road full of fallen

branches and stones.

But little by little,

as you left their voices behind,

the stars began to burn

through the sheets of clouds,

and there was a new voice,

which you slowly

recognized as your own,

that kept you company

as you strode deeper and deeper

into the world,

determined to do

the only thing you could do -

determined to save

the only life you could save.

Yes, I am more like Martha than Mary. I imagine that some of you feel the same way. Yet, I have learned that in the midst of the distractions around me I must … if I am to be true to myself … I must take time to quietly listen. Listen so that God’s Spirit … often disguised as my own voice … can speak a truth I’ve been avoiding.

Rabbi Hillel was a contemporary of Jesus. This is attributed to him: “If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?”

When we learn to break through the distractions and become centered and quiet we will hear that voice leading us … however painfully … into the fullness of life. Then our actions are no longer mere distraction, but have a powerful purpose. This is what it means to take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

I end with another quote from Dag Hammarskjold … one that I often use as a blessing:

“For all that has been, thanks! For all that will be, yes!”

Amen