

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – July 17, 2016

“Martha AND Mary”

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

Food poured magically from my mother's kitchen. Like pent up waters breaking free over a dam to fill the river downstream, when the time came in our home for the empty board to be set, food spilled out from her kitchen into the dining room in torrents of dishes, bowls, platters, tureens, baskets, and saucers, along with plates, glasses, forks, knives, napkins, cups, butter, jam, coffee, tea, cream, and sweets. I never saw anyone lack for plenty. On holidays in particular my brothers and I set to like wanderers who hadn't eaten in a week, food piled on two plates, let alone one. I never knew anyone to not find something they could enjoy eating. Friends and families and neighbors lined tables that stretched out of the dining room to fill other parts of the house. It was magnificent and joyful and loud and satisfying.

I didn't know how she did it; in fact, I gave her methods very little thought as a boy. Too little, I think now. Because as I grew older, I began to notice that often there was a chair at the dinner table conspicuously empty while others sat by and devoured their meals, talking and visiting and laughing... and that empty chair belonged to my mother. Absent from the gathering... until she scurried out of the

kitchen carrying another pitcher of iced tea or a fresh bowl of berries or a refill of bread stuffing. Back and forth she went, making sure nothing was lacking. And in the meantime, the plate she usually prepared for herself sat at her place at the table barely touched. And over time, we learned to fuss at her, to chide her to sit down and eat. But she would glare at us... and keep moving until most everyone was finished before she would sit down and hurriedly eat up her food, because it was nearly time for her to begin cleaning up.

And I think... what if she hadn't offered all that hospitality? What if she just sat at the table like everyone else? Would we all have been so satisfied? I doubt it. My mother was a master of the family meal, and we all appreciated the experience, even if we didn't always show it in our willingness to help her out. We were busy enjoying ourselves, you see. And now I am really humbled by her efforts for us.

So imagine... when Jesus arrived at Martha's home, disciples in tow ---who knows how many? A dozen at least, right?... likely more--- and the Scriptures say that Martha "welcomed" them into her home, I presume that means bowls and pitchers of water to wash weary feet and faces, perhaps cloaks and wraps to be put away, cushions or chairs to be found, places for everyone to rest and converse. And, of course, food. Food for her honored guest, food for his companions, food for family, any others who dropped in to learn what was happening. And I imagine that around

the rooms they filled all their places, sitting in their seats and listening to all that Jesus had to say to them, all he had to teach them, save for one empty seat that belonged to Martha. And what if she had not provided such hospitality? I expect there were many present who would have been disappointed, some who would have disapproved. I bet they all expected to be looked after.

Thank God for Martha, for despite Jesus' reproach, I don't feel he meant she had done wrong in providing for her guests. Rather Jesus asks her to be at peace with her offering, to not take her worry too far, to not disapprove of her sister because she had chosen to listen to Jesus for a time. Either Martha's offerings are a gift she can enjoy, or they are a chore, a "distraction", as Jesus says, from the miracle of faith that is happening all around her, a miracle that Mary had chosen to witness and that Jesus would not take away from her.

So, what will it be for us? In last Sunday's teaching, Jesus called his followers to go and perform acts of mercy, busying themselves with the works of the Kingdom of God like the Good Samaritan who helped a dying man abandoned at the side of the road. Yet now Jesus is commending Mary for sitting and listening while leaving her sister to provide food and hospitality the entire household. So, is it Outreach Committee or Prayer Chain? First Nations Kitchen or Bible Study? Deeds or contemplation?

Well... yes. As one preacher puts it: *“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. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be... ‘Yes.’”*¹

It isn't a choice between being like Martha or being like Mary in the end, I think. There is only the decision of when it is best to be at peace and when it is time to step forward and do. And both things are necessary. And it is not given to us to judge another for what they choose. But I do know this... All of us must take the time to listen to the pains and joys of this world and consider what God is asking of us as followers of Jesus. And I also know this... Somebody has to prepare those family meals, otherwise no one eats.

Now if I had it to do all over again as a kid, I would help my mother more. And if she had it to do all over again, I would hope she would spend more time with everyone at the dinner table instead of thinking she had to do all the work. And I really hope that after Jesus spoke to Martha, she tossed her dishtowel back into the kitchen and plopped down right there next to her sister to enjoy time with Jesus and his friends, and that, before the day was done, Mary and others rose to help her.

¹ Fred Craddock, quoted in Synthesis for July 17, 2016 from Luke: Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.