

St. James Lutheran Church

Pentecost VIII

July 18, 2010

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First Reading: Genesis 18:1-10a

Second Reading: Colossians 1:15-28

Gospel: Luke 10:38-42

Being and Doing

There's an old one-line joke about Christ's second coming: "Jesus is coming – look busy." It surely wouldn't do to be found napping or slacking when Jesus returned! Prudent individuals definitely would want to present the appearance of active and faithful discipleship. The notion that faithfulness is demonstrated by "busy-ness" has a long history. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees and other devout persons kept very busy observing all the dictates of the law, down to the most minute details. In more than one parable, Jesus commends those servants whom their master finds hard at work upon his return.

In our own time we tend to define busy congregations as faithful congregations. A congregation where there's a lot going on – a full calendar of activities and programs – is generally seen as more faithful than one without so much going on. When asked to describe their own congregation, most people tend to talk about all the things they are doing. Every congregation values its members who are "doers" – the ones who are always willing to roll up their sleeves and do whatever it is that needs to be done. Pastors tend to validate their ministry by describing how busy they are.

Martha was by all measures a "doer". When Jesus comes to the home she shares with her sister for dinner, Martha zooms into action. She practices some heavy-duty hospitality, doing her utmost to make sure everything is just right for their dinner guest. We can picture Martha,

whipping up a tasty meal, setting the table, offering Jesus something to drink and perhaps an appetizer.

Meanwhile, her sister Mary doesn't lift a finger. Mary simply sits at the feet of Jesus, hanging on his every word. Martha is finally overcome with exasperation and says to Jesus:

"Lord, don't you care?"

"Are you paying attention?"

"Two of us live here, but one of us is doing all the work!"

"Why don't you tell my sister to get up and lend a hand?!"

But instead of commending Martha for all her ambitious efforts, and chastising Mary for her lazy negligence, Jesus says this:

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her."

It would be interesting to know how the rest of that evening went – and who did the dishes after Jesus departed. But the story ends with these words Jesus speaks to Martha.

What are we meant to learn from this story? One lesson is that busy-ness should not always be equated with faithfulness. Martha is described as "distracted by her many tasks." Jesus says to her, "You are worried and distracted by many things." It doesn't matter how fast you are pedaling if you have lost your sense of direction. A faithful person should be neither worried nor distracted. Busy-ness for its own sake is not necessarily fruitful.

As a church, our mission is not to have lots of programs and to keep everybody busy. We can be very busy doing things that have little or nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our busy-ness can distract us from what is of first importance. The urgent becomes the enemy of the important.

But let's be careful not to be too hard on Martha. Sometimes this story gets interpreted as a choice between being like Mary or like Martha, between contemplation and action, between being and doing. If you read the whole

gospel of Luke, it is readily apparent that Jesus is not presenting an either/or choice, but rather a both/and.

Just last Sunday we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan, which comes right before today's gospel in the 10th chapter of Luke. In that parable, Jesus emphasizes the necessity of active, compassionate care on behalf of our neighbors. Jesus is by no means undercutting the value of genuine hospitality or dedicated service. Instead he is giving equal value to the place of contemplation in a faithful life. The pattern of his own life demonstrates the importance Christ placed on both action and contemplation. He worked tirelessly in ministry to those in need. Jesus also took time to withdraw to a quiet place to meditate and pray.

There is a kind of rhythm and balance to a faithful life. Last week, the emphasis was on action – today it is contemplation. Mary is commended for giving Jesus her complete and undivided attention. This is harder to do than it seems. Many people would rather be busy doing something – anything – than sitting still in rapt contemplation. It takes no small amount of concentration and discipline to focus entirely on Jesus. People get uneasy at worship with extended silence. Yet who is more worthy of our contemplation than Jesus?

Our 2nd reading from Colossians reminds us of exactly who it is who is sitting in Mary and Martha's living room.

- * "Jesus is the image of the invisible God." Consider this awesome reality. The Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, the One who is, who was, and who will forever be – is embodied in the modest frame of this Jesus from Nazareth. Jesus is the best picture God ever took!
- * "All things have been created through him and for him." Jesus is no Johnny – come – lately. He was present at the Creation. He is the Word God spoke which called all things into being. He is that word now made flesh.
- * "In Him all things hold together." The grace of God in Jesus Christ is the force that holds everything together. He is the essential,

irreplaceable glue of existence. Without Jesus, everything falls apart, nothing makes sense, there is no lasting hope. With Jesus, things come into focus, there is a living center to the universe, it is possible to make sense. Which is why Jesus gives a peace that this world cannot give.

- * "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." There's the mystery in all its majestic complexity: Jesus is both a flesh and blood Palestinian Jew and the Son of the Living God. Not half man/half God, not God disguised as a man, not a man with many godly qualities – but true God and true man. It can't be explained – it can only be believed and contemplated. What might this mean for you and for me?
- * "Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things." Did Mary have some deep intuitive sense of this? That Jesus had in himself the divine power to make right all that had gone wrong in this world, to overcome the yawning gap between sinful humanity and a just and righteous God? To transform enemies into friends and bring hope to a despairing world?

If Mary had any inkling of this, is it any wonder she couldn't be bothered with setting the table or making the salad?

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Before we get busy with our action plans and our to-do lists, you and I would do well to contemplate who it is who has come among us in Jesus.

→ Job one is to receive the Living Word of God into our hearts and minds.

→ Before concerning ourselves with "What" and "When" and "How", we need to take time to contemplate the "Who", the One is also the "Why" behind all our activities.

Time spent in prayer and worship and study and meditation – all aspects of contemplation – makes the time we spend in serving and loving and teaching and witnessing truly vibrant and fruitful and worthwhile.

Amen