

Doing and Being (Luke 10: 38-42.) 07/18/10 .

Introduction.

This gospel story today is about distractions from the real priorities- ***“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things”***.

Do you ever imagine that God has a sense of humor? There certainly are times when I imagine God laughing at me. For example in 1979 I attended an international conference for Anglican/Episcopal Rectors and Ministers of Worship at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, in Houston, Texas. Sadly this was in August where for the whole two weeks the temperature was in the 90's as was the relative humidity! There were about 250 attendees from all over the world. Only one person was compelled by George Mimms, the conference leader, to sing a solo. Guess who?

Or again, about 20 years ago, as part of the search process I was involved in at St Stephen's, all their finalists were asked to come and celebrate and preach at a Eucharist just for members of the Search Committee. Obviously on that sort of occasion you want everything to go really well. This story was the Gospel passage on the previous Sunday, so I preached on it. At the end of the Eucharist, two women, members of the Search Committee, approached me and said ***“we just want you to know that both of us are named are Martha!”*** I felt God was laughing at me and saying ***“trust me, if this is where you are called to be I will work it out”***.

This passage raises some challenging question for us. ***How do we respond to Holy Scripture? Do we allow the teaching of the Scriptures to truly challenge our expectations and assumptions an even change them?*** It is so easy for us to blunt or even negate the thrust of a passage, by coming to it with a preconceived set of expectations. In the case of this passage expectations about work, hospitality, priorities and how we are to serve Jesus (and others) . So this morning lets model an approach to this passage (as we should approach every passage of Scripture)-putting ourselves **under** rather that **over** it. This means us not acting as the judge of Scripture, deciding what is acceptable to us or not-but instead allowing Scripture to be our judge. Allowing it to challenge our deeply held and even cherished assumptions about what is right/wrong: true/false: right/wrong.

Now don't worry, I am not suggesting that we all become fundamentalists. Fundamentalism actually **reduces and even emasculates** the power and authority of Scripture, by limiting it to long held interpretations- what is already the comfortable and accepted shibboleths. This is usually accomplished by proof texting In contrast I want us to function allowing Scripture the role that we Episcopalians dutifully **say** it has for us. That is Scripture is our primary source of authority which we read, rigorously study and carefully interpret.

How do we set about making choices and setting priorities? What does it mean for us to truly follow Jesus? How important is it for to hear Jesus? This passage, if we will allow it to, will raise these questions for us in a practical way. In the story two women (sisters) make choices on the basis of their different priorities. This illustrates the fact that different priorities lead to different choices, which in turn lead to different outcomes.

Luke tells us (v.39.) ***“Mary ...sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.”***

It is easy to imagine the scene. Martha and Mary welcome Jesus (and his disciples) into their home. John’s gospel tells us they lived, with their brother Lazarus at Bethany. Today Bethany is located a mile and a half East of Jerusalem on the West Bank and has the Arabic name al-Eizariya-place of Lazarus.

Their guests will appreciate, and Eastern hospitality demands, that a meal be served. Jesus, the teacher, is explaining and teaching and a group of folk is listening to him. Martha (who I suspect was the older sister) is busy organizing and overseeing preparations for the meal. She looks around expecting her sister also to be in the kitchen ready to offer a helping hand. But Mary isn’t there, in fact she is not doing anything as far as Martha is concerned. She is merely sitting at Jesus feet-drinking in what he is saying. Sitting at a rabbi’s feet is what the rabbis pupils are expected to do, but never before in the history of Judaism has a woman been admitted by a rabbi as a disciple. Mary’s priority is to be with Jesus; to seize the opportunity to hear his words. For her **everything** else is secondary-even being hospitable and giving her sister a helping hand.

Jesus says ***“there is need of only one thing”*** (v.42). That is no distractions are permitted, all need to set priorities, make choices and stick to them. But what is the one thing to which Jesus refers? At one level of the story Jesus is saying, ***‘Martha, you do not need a super elaborate meal with many complex dishes’***. One simple dish is all that is required. The more complex the meal, the more likely it is that you will be distracted by its preparation. However at a deeper level Jesus is saying the one thing-that is the priority for all my disciples, is to truly serve me by sitting at my feet and listening to me.

That has been really hard for me to learn. When I first went to see the person who became my Spiritual Director she asked me what I wanted to get out of Spiritual Direction. I responded by saying I wanted to deepen my prayer life. I went to explain that I was very good at telling God what things I wanted Him to do. I was fairly good at saying thank you to God for the things that he did in my life. But, I continued, I am just nowhere when it comes to listening to what God wants to say to me. Her eyes gleamed as she responded ***‘I think I can help you grow in that area’***.

Sometimes at this point guilt rears its ugly head. Isn't it terribly selfish, narcissistic and passive to be focusing on yourself, rather than taking action and doing things for others? Logically this might seem true but Jesus seems to operate on more than just logic. He said, for example, '**Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these other things will follow as appropriate**'. St. Augustine, in some well-known words said '**Love God and do what you like**'. This is not a recipe for self-indulgence, since if we truly love God it will affect every aspect of our lives with him and our relationships with others.

It is quite striking that the story preceding this in Luke is Parable of Good Samaritan. This begins with the question '**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**' Love the Lord your God with all heart, mind, soul and strength- i.e. put God at center of your life. Also love neighbor as self. The parable of the good Samaritan explains what it means to love our neighbor. Our passage today explains what it means to love God.

If we truly sit at feet of Jesus and listen to him we will have a focus and direction for our lives. Our culture is committed to activism, even frenetic activity, easy for us to begin to feel guilty if not busy all the time. Often bring our cultures bias to our spiritual lives. We strive for spiritual attainment. We give ourselves to a frenzy of religious activities, often devaluing contemplative prayer and, as a consequence lose out on the joy of listening to God.

What of Martha? She had many tasks, partly self-imposed, partly expectations of others. She was distracted literally pulled or dragged away. The implication is she wanted to be with Jesus but was prevented from doing so by giving in to the pressure to provide superior hospitality. How often this can happen to us?

Conclusion

When did you or I last 'sit at Jesus feet' and listen to him without distraction or trying to advance our own agenda?

