7-20/21-19 The Power of Presence Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 10:38-42

In Mr. Hardy’s 9th grade History class, my sister Jen was moved around the room three times in the first week before Mr. Hardy exclaimed, “You’re nothing like your sister, are you?” He had quickly realized that whereas I was quiet in class, Jen would talk to whoever sat near her.

Many teachers like Mr. Hardy quickly recognized that while Jen and I are sisters, we definitely each have our own personality.

I talked mainly with my friends; Jen would talk with anyone.

I was more serious; Jen was more outgoing.

I loved history; Jen struggled with history.

I was the low voice alto; Jen was the high voice soprano.

I loved having Dad as a band director; Jen took piano lessons to avoid Dad as a teacher.

Consider your sibling or cousin or best friend. How are you similar? How are you unique?

Every parent of more than one child, even twins, recognizes that no two children are ever alike. Personally I am enjoying seeing how my three children are growing up with different passions.

Thankfully the Lord made us each unique in his image, with differing skills and gifts, differing personalities and passions, differing strengths and weaknesses.

These differences are not wrong, just diverse.

Today’s passage finds Jesus with two sisters named Mary and Martha, who also had very different personalities and priorities. These sisters lived in a village called Bethany, near Jerusalem. Because they are named in the Gospels, where few women are known by name, we can surmise that they were well known to the early disciples. I imagine Jesus was a frequent visitor to their home whenever he came near Jerusalem.

On this particular visit, Martha endeavored to offer the gift of hospitality to this respected rabbi and friend. As was the Jewish custom, she wanted to offer Jesus a warm welcome, and, I have no doubt, a magnificent meal. So she went about her many tasks as hostess.

Mary, however, took a seat at the feet of Jesus like any disciple of a learned rabbi, to listen and to learn.

Today, as we listen to this passage, we can understand both Mary and Martha.

How many times have we scurried around, striving to be the gracious hostess, or at the very least finding a nice restaurant in which to meet good friends? And how many times have we been in studies with women who yearn to learn more about the Bible and God’s love and God’s ways?

My grandmother was like many of us, a mixture of Mary and Martha. She enjoyed hosting the family holiday gatherings. She also enjoyed delving into the Disciple Bible Study courses well into her 80s.

Today, we can understand both women—yet, in the time of Jesus, Mary’s movements would have been considered radical, even shameful. Women did not sit and listen and learn from the rabbis. Women were seen as inferior to men, and thus sometimes considered incapable of learning.

..It was the custom for a Jewish man to pray every morning, thanking God he was not born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman. A common saying of the time was that it was better for the Torah to be burned than to be put into the hands of a woman.

So for Mary to sit at Jesus' feet, just as any student of a great rabbi would, was scandalous.

-Carol M. Norén “Who Dares To Be Free?” 7-21-19 ministrymatters.com

For Jesus to welcome Mary, welcoming her to come and sit and learn and listen and be in his presence, was also shocking. Yet, Jesus came to reach out to all God’s beloved children, beyond social convention. Jesus welcomed and honored men and women, Jew and Gentile and Samaritan, widow and children.

While Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, her sister Martha became increasingly distracted by all she had yet to do, that according to convention, Mary ought to have been helping her with.

She may have wanted to spend time at Jesus’ feet, like her sister Mary, but Martha got distracted by all she first had to accomplish. She was also distracted that Mary would not come and help her, and finally Martha reached her breaking point, turned to Jesus and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

To me, these words speak of familiarity. Martha is perturbed enough at her sister, and comfortable enough with Jesus, to ask for Jesus’ help in putting her sister in her place.

Yet, Jesus responds in a surprising way. He does not chastise Mary. And he also does not rebuke Martha. Too many times Martha is made out to be the villain in this story, which she is not.

I have no doubt Jesus appreciates her hospitality. For time and again throughout the Gospels Jesus emphasized the importance of living out our faith, of serving others in the ways of God. In Luke chapter 10 Jesus sent out 70 disciples and told them to expect hospitality from others, such as Martha was offering to them that evening. Later, in Luke chapter 22, Jesus defined discipleship in terms of serving others.

Yet, in this moment in time, Jesus also has a sense of urgency about him, now having his face set toward Jerusalem, knowing his death is near, knowing his time on earth is coming to a close. Knowing this may or may not be the last time he spends with these precious friends, Jesus wants to spend every moment he can passionately and compassionately sharing God’s Word, God’s love, God’s grace.

So Jesus’ response is not a rebuke. He is not setting up Mary against Martha. Rather, his response includes words of compassion and invitation: “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 away from her.”

How many times have we been distracted by all that we must do every day?

How many times do our to-do lists get in the way of our relationships?

Martha is like so many of us, who get caught up in the busyness of life, who are ruled by the tyranny of the urgent, who find little time to rest and just be instead of going and doing constantly. And our world rewards those who are busy 24/7, with no time for Sabbath rest!

Consider these common myths that we have come to believe, and the truth of how God sees these myths:

Myth #1. Busy equals important.

(God will not ask you on judgment day, “How busy were you?”)

Myth #2. Someone wins the rat race.

(God is not as interested in “what you do” as “who you are”)

Myth #3. Hurrying will buy us more time.

(We just fill the extra time with more work)

Myth #4. “Down time” is wasted time.

(God instituted the Sabbath for rest)

-David Derry sermoncentral.com 11-02

Being overcome with busyness, being trapped by the urgent, we lose focus on what is important in life, we get stressed out and take that stress out on others, and the most important thing in life—our relationship with our Lord—takes a back seat to the things that need done today. We neglect the gift of being in God’s presence, as well as the gift of being in the presence of others.

Martha was so distracted by all that she must do as hostess that she neglects the Holy One who is present in her house.

..Have you ever been to a meal at someone's home where the host's concern that everything be "perfect" ruined the whole evening? There comes a time in every good party when you just have to let the dishes stack up, the coffee get cold and the butter melt, so that everyone may simply sit down and talk around the table.

-Homiletics 7-23-95

..Writer Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. He recalled in his book *Stress Fractures*,

"I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style.

It was becoming unbearable.

I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly,

'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.'

Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered,

'Honey, you can tell me – and you don't have to tell me really fast.

Say it slowly."

I'll never forget her answer: 'Then listen slowly.'"

-Bits & Pieces, June 24, 1993, pp. 13-14. Sermonillustrations.com

Martha is distracted by her many tasks, and the fact her sister is not doing her part. Yet Jesus lovingly invited her to come and breathe and be in his presence.

“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 away from her.”

Notice Jesus does not say the best part, but the better part. For life is all about choices. Some days we choose to serve, and other days we choose to learn. Some days we choose to do and other days we choose to be.

Martha chose to be distracted by her to-do list, which pulled her away from focusing on Jesus, or spending time with the One she called Messiah.

How often are we pulled away from focusing on Jesus, distracted by work, family, chores, leisure activities, or even distracted by our own sense of what should be?

How many times have you pulled away from worshipping Jesus to go shopping, especially around Christmas? How many times have you pulled away from spending time in God’s Word, seeing the clutter that needs cleaned around your house? How many times have you pulled away from being open to God during worship, pulled away to think about all you need or want to do once you get home today? How many times have you pulled away from helping another in need, distracted by your own sense of who should help them or even if they deserve the help?

How often do we all get distracted from the better by the good?

“Dr. Mark Hollingsworth once made the statement,

‘If we forget God while serving God we will probably quit God!’”

If we serve God without being grounded in God we are apt to find ourselves burnt out because we are serving for the wrong reasons. “When we keep our attitude right we find that God will enable us to do what ‘needs’ to be done with joy and satisfaction.”

-John Hamby sermoncentral.com 7-02, adapted

James 1:22 says "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only."

Sometimes we want to just sit around and listen to God’s Word without going out and living it in our daily lives. But sometimes we need the flip side of that verse,

“Be ye hearers of the word and not doers only,” serving not just to fulfill needs,

but to live out our faith in Jesus. There is a time for us to be doers, and a time for us to be hearers. There is a time for us to focus on loving God, and a time for us to focus on loving neighbor. We are not called to neglect either one; yet, at certain times, one will be more a priority than another.

Today’s Scripture passage needs to go hand in hand with the story just prior to it, the story of the Good Samaritan.

..The Samaritan embodies love for the neighbor; Mary embodies love for God.

Both the Samaritan and Mary are socially disqualified from being models of anything good according to the norms of their culture, and yet they are both images of the kingdom which Jesus brings. Both are needed to complete the discipleship Jesus calls for: to hear God’s word and to do it (Luke 8:21).

-Brian Peterson 7-21-19 workingpreacher.org

We need both our inner Marys and our inner Marthas to fully live as disciples of Christ and members of the family of God. We need both service and learning, both contemplation and hospitality, as we seek to love God and love neighbor.

Yet all we do and say must be grounded in the word and ways of God.

Jesus is radically inviting both Mary and Martha to choose the better part for that moment, to be in his presence, as the opportunity may not happen again.

And while we do not know what Martha chose to do in that moment, we do know that in the Gospel of John, she confesses her faith in Jesus as Messiah—before he raised her brother from the dead.

Mary and Martha knew the importance of presence, especially in a culture when they were overlooked and undervalued. Yet Jesus saw them, and valued them.

So they knew the power of being in Jesus’ presence, which is the presence of God.

Today, we are invited to also choose the better part, and to nurture our relationships with Jesus in the midst of our busy lives. Today, we are invited to also choose the better part, and recognize that we are always in the presence of God, which is a gift of God to us.

Helen Keller once said,

..Deep, solemn optimism, it seems to me, should spring from this firm belief in the presence of God in the individual; not a remote, unapproachable governor of the universe, but a God who is very near every one of us, who is present not only in earth, sea and sky, but also in every pure and noble impulse of our hearts.

-The World I Live In and Optimism: A Collection of Essays, Courier Corporation.

In thepastorsworkshop.com: God’s presence

God is present with us! The God of the universe knows us by name. Claims us as beloved sons and daughters. And offers us the gift of Jesus as our Savior and Lord, and the gift of the Holy Spirit as God’s guiding power in our lives.

As we sang earlier, and are teaching the children at VBS, God is with us- before us, behind us, above us, below us. God is present with us in times of sorrow and times of joy, times of celebration and times of struggle. We are safe inside God’s love.

Max Lucado once tweeted: “Don’t equate the presence of God with a good mood or a pleasant temperament. God is near whether you are happy or not.“

-Twitter post from Sep 07, 2013. On thepastorsworkshop.com: God’s presence

Today, no matter our mood or whatever we face in the moment, we are called to rest in the presence of God, and like Mary, and like Daniel, we are called to spend intentional time cultivating our relationship with Jesus through prayer and worship and the study of God’s Word. Next week we will look at the power of prayer, which is foundational for our faith relationships.

Once we recognize the depth of God’s love for us, then, in response to God’s presence with us, we are called to go and be in the presence of others, to share God’s love with them.

There is power in the presence of the Christian community. We are not called to live our faith in isolation, but within and with others in the body of Christ, the church. Yes, in the church will be a rich diversity of gifts and personalities, skills and passions, strengths and weaknesses. Yes, sometimes we are challenged to work together in the church. Yet there is still God’s power in and through and among us when we come together in worship and study and service.

And when we recognize the presence of God in our midst, we are then called to respond to God’s love through our love of neighbor, coming together to do the oftentimes hard work of ministry. I’ve witnessed the results of such labor this past week at VBS.

The power of presence is once again the power of God at work within us, to do far more than we can ask or imagine.

May we learn from Mary and Martha to cherish God’s presence, as well as cherish the opportunity to share God’s love in the presence of others. May we grow in our love of God and love of neighbor. And may we give thanks that we are not alone on this journey of faith and life.

God is with us. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.