

**Proper 11 - 8 Pentecost – Year C – July 18, 2010**  
**Amos 8:1-2; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

It has been said that “listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. We move towards the friends who listen to us. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.” There’s no doubt that good communication is essential for relationship. In effect, good communication creates an atmosphere of hospitality in which the needs of each party are expressed, understood, and therefore may be fulfilled. Good communicators learn to both listen well, and to speak well. Theologian, Paul Tillich says that “The first duty of love is to listen.”

In the reading from Luke’s gospel this morning, we have the story of Jesus visiting at the home of His friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. While Mary’s literal and spiritual position is clearly stated, there’s no mention of Lazarus’ whereabouts in this account of Martha’s flustered outburst. Perhaps because it was obvious that if Jesus were visiting, Lazarus would be listening to whatever Jesus was saying. We might be tempted to think purely along gender stereotypes when we consider this insider’s look at Jesus’ dinner, bed and breakfast stopover on the road to Jerusalem. There is little question that in Jesus’ day it **was** predominantly a women’s role to see to the efficient functioning of the household, including providing hospitality to guests. But I have a suspicion that Jesus has never paid much attention to the ebb and flow of cultural norms across the centuries, which seem to disregard basic equality for all, **or** the ever changing currents of human-made rules, especially when it comes to who should do what. As if God in heaven quakes with irritation at the mere thought that girls might want to play with a *G.I. Joe* as much as a *Barbie*, and vice versa. But back to Martha, Mary and Jesus. While it may have been the usual role of the women in the household to see to the needs of the guests, Martha’s outburst gives us pause for thought. It seems to hint that to continue to think exclusively in those terms is to make these women into two-dimensional cardboard cutouts, instead of living, thinking, complex human beings. Luke would not have reported this minor tempest in a teacup unless there was something more important to be gleaned from the exchange.

Setting aside the image of Martha as a domestic goddess, or in this case the frustrated domestic diva, we can also consider the scene from a purely behavioral context. There is no doubt that Martha is busy multi-tasking, whereas we find Mary sitting silently at Jesus’ feet just listening. If Luke’s purpose was to go no further than create a polarity of behaviors for Jesus to choose between, then the principal characters might just as well have been Peter and Andrew. Indeed, why not a scene involving Peter hauling in a catch of fish, while Andrew passively listens to Jesus teaching by the lake? It would be just as realistic for us, whether it ever happened or not, especially to make the point. But only if the dichotomy in behavior *is* the point! For Luke there seems to be some importance attached to the fact that Mary’s posture, as a disciple at Jesus’ feet, is acceptable to Jesus. For Luke it may even be a small thing, but nonetheless it opens a window on Jesus’ view of the glorious equality of all at the feet of God. Since this is probably not the main point of the vignette, it encourages us to consider that there is even more than a simplistic contrast between two types of people or the Martha versus Mary cliché. Perhaps heavily influenced by years of hearing Mary pitted against Martha, even today we might notice those among us who seem destined to live out our discipleship in the details of common life – preparing meals, volunteering for the rummage sale, caring for the homebound, organizing outreach events, and so on. Then there are those among us who seem to gravitate towards being disciples in service to the word. Those who faithfully attend the Bible study each week, members of our Links of Prayer group who pray for this community daily, those who practice contemplative prayer, our chalice bearers, acolytes or Sunday morning readers, and our Sunday school teachers. Realistically, while we each have gifts and preference, none of these vocations is exclusive by any means! In other words, we all have to cook a few meals, do laundry, and clean the bathroom sometimes, even when we might prefer to read a good book or sit down and enjoy some quiet time.

Our Scriptures readings come from the New Revised Standard Version translation, which unfortunately uses the words “better part” to describe Mary’s behavior, giving us the false sense that listening is better than doing. All those of us who have been feeling a sense of dread or guilt, because we enjoy getting things done can now relax. All those of us who have always thought our more contemplative lifestyle was just a teensy bit superior, can take a small bite of the humble pie that Martha just finished baking for us. In several other Bible translations, this portion of the Greek is translated as Mary choosing “that good part”. We have to pay attention to what exactly is going on in the scene if we are to appreciate what is good in Jesus’ estimation and what is not so good. Jesus does not criticize Martha’s good work of hospitality as discipleship, over and against Mary’s good work of listening to the Word. Jesus is concerned for Martha, because she is worried and distracted, anxious and stressed. Martha’s words tell us that at that moment she is completely self-absorbed – “my sister has left **me** to do all the work by **myself**.” In contrast, Mary is focused entirely on Jesus. Christ is the source and sustainer of our life. The commandment reads that we love God first, and then love our neighbor as ourselves. Eugene Peterson’s personal modern-language translation from *The Message*, offers us another way to hear Jesus’ response to Martha. In Peterson’s translation, Jesus’ words become, “Martha, dear Martha, you’re fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it -- it’s the main course, and won’t be taken from her.” Jesus’ presence is the substantive part of the meal, not an appetizer or side dish. For Christians like you and me, the main course of our lives is worshipping the Lord.

Christ’s perfect hospitality is reflected in the shape of our worship together. Our liturgy, which is defined as the work of the people, embodies both the hospitality of Mary, listening and learning attentively to the Word, and the hospitality of Martha as we gather around the table to participate in the Eucharistic feast. Both are essential for our life and ministry as individuals in Christ’s service, and together as a faith community. Both strengthen us in body, mind, and spirit. In the story, both women are evidently devoted to Christ – one manifests that in hospitality, the other in listening to Jesus’ teaching. Martha shows her discipleship and service of the Lord in welcoming Christ, but her hospitality is anxious because she has lost her focus on the Lord Jesus. If we lose our focus on Christ, our doing is a chore rather than a joy-filled vocation, and is aimless. Mary understands that Jesus is the singular object of devotion and therefore has chosen the good part of life: listening and learning from God’s Word is always central to our lives of faith, so that we can serve as God calls us. When we are primarily focused on Christ, each aspect of the normal cycle of daily work and rest flows from our love of God in Christ, and transforms all we do into an offering to God.

If we think of the Word as the “main course” in what Pastor Stephanie Frey describes as the feast of life, then it “doesn’t give that immediate sense that listening is *better* than doing. Rather, it places these activities in balance.” Frey goes on to say, “Jesus is the host, not Martha, Mary or any of us, and He spreads the word like a banquet to nourish and strengthen us.” In the slightly broader context of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem where He and His disciples are relying on the hospitality of friends and strangers, Jesus is telling us all how we are to welcome Him into our hearts and homes. Food and accommodations are practical aspects of hospitality, but fundamentally all acts of hospitality touch our hearts, because hospitality is grounded in our relationship with God in Christ Jesus. Listening to our friend, Jesus, is a creative act and He is always the One to whom we move towards. It is Jesus, the Word, who helps us to unfold and expand through our deeds of love, always creating opportunities for God’s radical hospitality to touch another’s heart. In the end, God’s gracious Word contains commands to both to sit and listen, and to go and do. Both are necessary to communicate God’s love to the world.

Amen.