

## Sermon – Pentecost 6

**Colossians 1: 15-29, Luke 10:38-42**

He is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation;  
for in him all things  
in heaven and on earth were created,  
things visible and invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—  
all things have been created through him and for him. **Amen.**

Our readings this week offer so much scope for teaching and developing our faith. As I mulled over the first few lines of the letter to the Colossians, I couldn't help but notice the similarities to our creed which we will be saying soon after the sermon. There's a similar cadence and rhythm and when I did some research on this piece of scripture, I found out that these first few verses are actually a hymn fragment. It's probably some of the oldest writing in our Christian canon and reflects the earliest form of worship. And it's interesting that we have this particular lectionary reading this year, the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the writing of the creed which articulates our faith and what the Christian church believes. I love the creed. It's so rich in language and theological meaning, perhaps one day we'll do a sermon series on it and as I'm thinking perhaps this anniversary year is the year to do it!

But today I'm actually going to preach on our Gospel reading. It's not a long reading, only 5 verses and I remember being profoundly moved by a sermon on this scripture in my early 20s. At the time I was worshipping with the Russian 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists in Strathfield, Sydney the home of my earliest Christian formation. A visiting Polish pastor had come to preach and I was blown away by his sermon on Martha and Mary. Ever since then, that sermon

has been my benchmark for this scripture and today I have decided that it's time for me to have a crack at it. So here's my take on this well known piece of scripture: Martha and Mary, two sisters who both worship Jesus but in their own ways using their own God given gifts.

Well how tempting is it, when you read this piece of scripture, to say it's a metaphor for a right and a wrong way of being with Jesus? There is a famous legend told about Martha of Bethany that was popular in the Middle Ages. In this story, which takes place after the resurrection of Jesus, she becomes a traveling preacher and ends up in a small town in France that, unfortunately, has a chronic dragon problem. She manages to slay the dragon and, in doing so, wins the whole town over to Christianity. In that same story, her sister Mary, on that same trip, ends up starting a monastery in the wilderness, meaning they both live out the roles assigned to them in Christian history: Martha acts and Mary studies. Martha represents an active faith, while Mary represents a contemplative faith.

This dichotomy comes in many ways from our scripture today, in which Martha shows Jesus hospitality while Mary sits at his feet. The two women embody different aspects of Christian discipleship, and I think both are lifted up as positive characters. They are both doing good things. There is no villain in this story.

But ultimately, Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better part, and this represents a tension point for most readers. Why is Jesus, who has just told the parable of the Good Samaritan, now saying that sitting at his feet is the better thing to do than serving him? Does Luke think contemplative practices of Christianity (prayer and study) are really better than the active practices (hospitality and service)? And should we think that too?

To see if we can make any headway on this, let's take a step back and look at each character's actions.

First, we see that Martha is described as welcoming Jesus into her home. She is showing him hospitality by receiving and preparing a meal for him. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus tells his disciples that those who welcome them will be blessed and that the Kingdom of God has come near to them. You might remember I preached on this passage two weeks ago. Similarly, in Luke 19, Zacchaeus will also welcome Jesus. Welcoming is the act of a true disciple in Luke. Martha is doing the right thing.

Her sister, Mary, is described as sitting at Jesus' feet while listening to his words. Both actions suggest the posture of a true disciple. In the New Testament and in its wider culture, sitting at someone's feet is a sign of deference to a teacher and indicates a teacher/disciple relationship. For instance, Paul describes himself as sitting at the feet of his teacher Gamaliel in Acts 22:3. Similarly, the theme of listening to the word of the Lord is a recurring one in both Luke and Acts (Luke 5:1; 6:47; 7:29; 8:14, 21; 10:16; 11:28; 14:35; Acts 2:22; 4:4; 10:22; 13:7, 44; 15:7; 19:10; 20:28) and appears as a core piece of authentic discipleship. Thus, we have two sisters and two disciples.

The trouble, then, is not what either sister has done. The trouble comes when we are told that Martha is distracted by many things. These distractions feel relatable as she juggles a household and serving the Lord. She then turns to Jesus and asks why he does not seem to care, and why he hasn't asked her sister to help. Again, this feels relatable, and I think we, as readers, could even sympathize with Martha in her request. She is working hard and needs help.

But by making this request, she is forcing Jesus to choose between the two (good) behaviors: either telling Mary to stop listening and help her sister, or rejecting Martha's plea. Isn't that such a human behaviour? Don't we all sometimes fall into this trap, perhaps wanting to justify ourselves or prop ourselves up?

But Jesus flips the script on her (and on us) by telling her that she is worried about so many things, but only a few things, indeed, only one thing is needed (verse 42). Mary, he tells her, has chosen the better part, one that will not be taken away from her.

The problem wasn't that Martha was serving, and that this is worse than sitting at Jesus' feet. The problem was that she was distracted by the wrong things. She became focused on the fact that her sister wasn't helping. Like the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Pharisee in the Parable of the Tax Collector, Martha is focused on the actions of others and their perceived shortcomings, as opposed to focusing on her own relationship with Jesus. It is this misorientation, not her service or her hospitality, that leads to Jesus' gentle rebuke. Mary has chosen to build her relationship with Jesus in a very direct way, and this relationship will never be taken away.

In this way, the story of these two sisters serves as a powerful example for us today. It turns out that maybe Luke isn't attempting to prioritize one act of Christian discipleship over another. Maybe instead he is presenting the idea that we can do right and good things but still be distracted by the wrong things. We can focus more on the perceived shortcomings of those around us than on our own relationship with Jesus. I know that I have indeed fallen into this trap. How about you?

So yes, in Luke, disciples both serve and listen to the word, just as disciples today navigate both the contemplative and the active practices of faith. Sometimes we slay dragons, and sometimes we start monasteries. But Luke's deeper concern is that our orientation be in the right place: that we focus on Jesus, and let the main thing be the main thing.

So how do we apply this today? I think that we as a community are blessed with people with many different gifts. Some people are drawn to action – in fact I think our parish is richly blessed with action oriented people. Perhaps our challenge is to develop ways that we can kneel at the foot of Jesus? We aren't strong on bible study or prayer, beyond our weekly worship. I've said for some time that life groups, with a focus on reading scripture and praying together, are a way to build our faith with a group of compatible people. I'm hoping that in the future, this will become part of the way we do things around here. Who wants to be part of it?

Let us pray.

Loving Lord Jesus,

We pray that you will always be with us as we each make our journeys of life and faith. We pray that you will guide us as we discern how to enrichen our faith and love for you. We pray this in your mighty name, Amen.