

Delivered at Shepherd by the Sea Episcopal-Lutheran Church in Gualala, California,
July 17, 2016

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On the Gospel for July 17, 2016, Luke 10:38-42

Beloved of God:

We are clear about what we should learn from Mary in this story in our Gospel. She sat at Jesus' feet to learn what his message was. So we need to be focused on the Gospel of Christ. We need to sit at his feet to learn about the feast he has prepared for us. The New Testament sees this feast as the New Passover, the feast in which we celebrate our liberation from all that enslaves us and frees us to be God's people. We are bound together as God's redeemed family at this feast. So we serve each other in love. We are not told in this story what Mary understood of Jesus' teaching, but her attention to him exhorts us to focus on the whole meaning of the Gospel for ourselves and the world around us.

We say in our common table prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest." But the moment Christ is guest at our table, we realize that our table is part of a larger feast that God spreads for us. The food we put on our tables is food given us by God to be eaten as members of God's family. We could as well say in our table prayer, "May we be guests at your feast, Lord, as we eat together the meal you have given us."

What we should learn from Martha in this story is more convoluted. Martha, the story tells us, welcomed Jesus to eat with her family at her house. It says distinctly that this was her house, although Mary lived there. And clearly she is the one who prepares the meal. We can assume that Martha invited Jesus because she loved to have Jesus in her home and loved his teaching. But you don't invite a guest to your home and just sit and talk with him, as if the meal would prepare itself. Especially if the guest was Jesus. So we can imagine how much stress was on her to prepare this meal as well as she could. The pressure is on her to get it right. We are not told anything about Martha's relationship with Mary, but Mary chooses to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him without helping prepare the meal.

Suddenly Martha blurts out, something she probably regretted the moment she said it, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work. Tell her to help me!"

Jesus' response is simple, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good part that shall not be taken from her."

Something had gone wrong here for Martha. What was wrong was not that she invited Jesus to dinner or that she wanted to prepare a good meal for him, or that

she was busy preparing it. What was wrong probably started back when she first decided on what to serve. Maybe she made all the decisions herself and did not include Mary. It seems clear that she and Mary did not talk over who would do what and how they would share the work. It was clear that Martha had forgotten what she surely knew and believed, that this meal like all meals was a gift of God to be received gracefully and thankfully, and shared as children at God's table. But Martha's anxiety over the meal made her treat it as her meal, to be eaten in her house, for which she bore all the responsibility.

The point here for us is not that we should stop the busy and endless work of serving our families, our friends, the hungry and homeless, refugees, and all who need our help. Rather the point is that we keep our focus on the One whose heart is in all this work. This is Christ's work in the world and we are participants in it. When we think we are in it by ourselves and for ourselves we miss the focus on the benign hand of God in our labors. We are guests at God's meal and servants of God in preparing it. But we get it wrong when we act as though it was our meal, ours to prepare by ourselves and ours to be thanked for it.

The trick is to work like Martha in preparing God's meal for those who come our way, but keep our ears focused on Jesus' message about whose meal it is .