

Dinner Will Be Late.

**A sermon by Carolyn Herring
Presented on Sunday, January 24, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Will you pray with me, please. Lord, open our eyes, our ears and our hearts to receive your word. And by the power of your holy spirit transform our lives. Amen.

Sermon:

Mary sat down! In this gospel story, Mary sat down. This may go down as one of the most scandalous acts recorded in the gospels. And that's why I like it. This story, like all of the gospel stories, has a lesson for us all.

Jesus is visiting his good friends Martha and Mary. You'll remember it was their brother Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. In that story, which is in John's gospel, we're told (and shown) how much Jesus loves Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. But this story is not about Lazarus, and actually the story about Lazarus being raised from the dead is not really about Lazarus either, it's about Jesus and Lazarus' two sisters. Here in Luke's story though, Jesus has spent a long day teaching - he's just finished telling the crowd the story of the Good Samaritan - and he comes to the home of Martha and Mary for a meal and probably a good night's rest.

Mary and Martha both welcome Jesus into their home- but in very different ways. Mary sits down - right at Jesus' feet to listen to him teach. Martha, being the good hostess, immediately begins to prepare the meal. The two sisters take two different paths, and, as Robert Frost says, that makes all the difference.

I think it took a lot of chutzpah for Mary to take her place at the feet of Jesus. By sitting at Jesus' feet, she was "acting mannish," that is, she was acting like a man. The custom at that time certainly would have been for the men to gather round the teacher and listen to him talk, while the women prepared the meal for when the men were finished. Discussion around matters of theology or philosophy was reserved for men only. In fact, there was a common rabbinic saying that went, "Let thy house be a meeting house for the sages, and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst..."

[but] talk not much with womankind.” You can imagine the comments whispered behind Mary’s back or maybe even spoken to her face. All of the guests would have been appalled at her brazen disregard for social custom - all of them, except one. The only guest who really mattered approved. Jesus was very pleased Mary sat down, and he says so.

This leaves Martha in a lurch, though. Finding herself alone in fixing the meal for everyone, Martha complains to Jesus about Mary. This is an argument between siblings that should sound familiar to every parent. “I’m doing all the work and she’s not helping.” Martha expects sympathy from Jesus, and tells him to tell Mary to get up and help serve. Instead, Jesus defends Mary and the choice she has made. Martha must have been very disappointed, and maybe a little embarrassed, and I’m sure, confused.

It’s a little ironic, I think. Martha was doing what she thought would please Jesus - she wanted to serve him, and her other guests also. It’s what a woman of that time was expected to do. We’d expect Jesus to praise her for that. But the more I read the gospel, the more I’m struck by how it always seems to turn things upside down. Jesus has a way of surprising us with his teaching. It’s rarely what you’d expect. No wonder he made the authorities angry enough to kill him. He’s always upsetting the norm. In front of all those present who have gathered to hear him teach, he challenges social customs and goes against the rules. Instead of praising Martha for her service, and telling Mary to get up and do her job, he praises Mary for sitting down, and tells Martha to leave her alone.

Why did Jesus challenge Martha? Surely he didn’t want to discourage her from serving. Remember he’s just told the group the story of the Good Samaritan, trying to make the point that we are responsible for caring for others, and serving one another is a good thing. When Jesus responds “no” to Martha’s demand I don’t think he means to put her down. I don’t think he just wants to contrast Mary’s good choice with Martha’s bad one. I think Jesus is concerned for Martha. He loves her as much as he loves her sister. They’re both his good friends, and you can hear his love in his voice when he speaks to her. “Martha, Martha,” he says. He has to say her name twice just to get her attention. “You are distracted by many things. Only one thing is necessary.” I’m sure Jesus appreciates her good intentions, but he knows that, as busy as Martha is, and as good as her intentions to serve may be, if she keeps up the way she’s going, at the end of the

day all she will have to show for her work is empty pots and pans, and an empty soul. And that's not the kind of service Jesus wants. Service *is* a good thing - but it's not the best thing. And it's not the one thing that is needed for our spiritual life.

It would have taken tremendous courage for Martha to tell her guests, including Jesus, that dinner will be late, that she wanted to take time to refresh her soul before refreshing their bodies. I imagine many of them would have been unhappy, just like they were unhappy with Mary. Maybe all of them would even have been angry at her - all of them except one. The one guest, the only guest who really mattered would have approved. Jesus would have been very pleased if Martha had set aside her tasks and taken time to sit at his feet and listen to him.

That's maybe the big difference between Mary and Martha in this story. Martha presumes to tell Jesus what he should do. Mary lets Jesus tell her what she should do. Martha wants to earn favor with Jesus through her service. Mary just listens. And what does she hear? I think Jesus was trying to tell both Martha and Mary the same thing. "You don't have to do anything to earn my love. Just spend time with me." And if the church truly is the body of Christ on earth, perhaps that's the same message we should be telling people.

We think of service as a good thing - and it is. We certainly want everyone to offer their service in whatever ways they feel God is calling them. But sometimes we get so caught up in our service, distracted by our many tasks, that we lose sight of why we're doing it. It's easy to become busy, to be involved and always doing. It's hard to find the time, and the courage, to sit down, to take the time to hear what Jesus has to say. But in this story of Martha and Mary, Jesus is telling them, and telling us, what it is that gives our service meaning, what it is that will carry us through when the burdens become heavy.

Mary has chosen the better way, which cannot be taken away from her - not by the men who think it's not her place to sit at Jesus' feet, not by Martha who expects her to serve instead of study, and not by anything in life that may knock her down or wear her out. What she has chosen will become her anchor in whatever storm she faces.

So this story, in the end, is not about choosing to serve or to study. It's about knowing the right relationship between the two, and being able to draw from the depth of our own

spiritual wells to sustain us wherever God calls us to serve. It's about making our relationship with Christ the first thing in our lives, and knowing that's why we serve.

Maybe it was Mary's intention to get up and serve after spending some time listening to Jesus.

Actually I imagine Jesus expected everyone to get up and serve after listening to him, and when they did, they would not be serving in order to earn his love. They would serve from the assurance that they are loved. That's what you learn when you spend time with Jesus.

The opportunity to gather together to worship, to study the Bible and talk openly about our faith experiences – these are things we take for granted. And there are precious opportunities for each of us to take our place at the feet of Jesus, to listen to what he has to say to each of us and then to get up and serve.

For us here today this is not all that scandalous, but there are Christians all over the world who do take a risk in order to claim what we take for granted. My cousin and his wife spent a couple of years teaching English in China. They went as missionaries, but they had to be careful not to proselytize or speak openly about their faith, so as not to get themselves or their students in trouble with the government.

We don't take that kind of risk with our faith, but still it is a challenge for us to find time to sit down. Life can be so busy. The responsibilities of family, work, maintaining health, paying the bills - these things that just make up ordinary life are the many tasks that can distract us from the one thing that is necessary. But it's that one thing - spending time with our Lord - that gives order and meaning to the rest of life. Martin Luther, the great Reformer, said he was so busy and had so much to do each day; he would never get anything done if he didn't spend an hour or two in prayer.

I've gotten in to the habit of coming into the sanctuary on Sunday mornings to sit for a while to prepare myself for worship. Last year, when Reverend Young first came, at one of the first Church Council meetings he said that he comes into the sanctuary and sits in different pews and prays for the people who sit there during the worship service - he prays for us - and he invited everyone on the Council to join him in that. (Although I'm sure he'd extend that invitation to everyone in the congregation.) At the time I thought to myself, well, that's not a big deal and it's an easy way to show support for the new guy, so I decided to try it, although it didn't mean a whole lot to me. Now after doing that for a year, it's something I look forward to each week. It's a time of quiet listening,

and being still and knowing that God is present, and I've found that when I go for a time without it, I miss it, and, I would like to think, God misses me. Have you ever thought about that - that God misses you when you're not around?

In the Disciple Bible study last week we discussed the book of Job. You know the story of Job - he's afflicted with all sorts of tragedy - death in his family, loss of property, bad health. Believing he's an innocent man, Job dares to demand answers from God about the unfairness of life. And at the end of the story God does answer Job. He speaks to him out of the whirlwind demanding that Job answer his questions. Where were you when I created the world? What answers do you have for me? What do you know basically? The point is God is an awesome God, omnipotent, all mighty - the creator of the world and everything in it, who can have anything in the world that God desires. His answer puts Job in his place.

Well this God who is all-powerful and awesome, transcendent, who holds the entire universe in his hand - this is the same God who became human. And though he could have anything in the world that he wants, what he wants is... you... and me.

Henri Nouwen, the Catholic priest who spent several years working in a community called *L'Arche* that served developmentally delayed persons, often struggled with finding a balance between quiet contemplation and serving. Nouwen wrote many books on the spiritual life and in one of them he wrote about the effort it took for him to make time each day for Christ.

"Every morning at 6:45 I go to the small convent of the Carmelite Sisters for an hour of prayer and meditation. I say 'every morning' but there are exceptions. Fatigue, busyness and preoccupations often serve as arguments for not going. Yet without this one hour a day for God, my life loses its coherency and I start experiencing my days as a series of random incidents and accidents.

My hour in the Carmelite chapel is more important than I can fully know myself. It is not an hour of deep prayer, nor a time in which I experience a special closeness to God; it is not a period of serious attentiveness to the divine mysteries. I wish it were! On the contrary, it is full of distractions, inner restlessness, sleepiness, confusion and boredom. It seldom, if ever, pleases my senses. But the simple fact of being for one hour in the

presence of the Lord and of showing him all that I feel, think, sense, and experience, without trying to hide anything, must please him.”¹

It’s tempting to think of our time in prayer or study or worship just in terms of what we get out of it. But have you ever thought about what Jesus gets out of it, our spending time with him? Well I think Henri Nouwen is right. To spend time in the presence of the Lord, to share our fears, confess our sins, plead our hopes and desires, to listen to his council, seek a close and loving relationship where nothing is hidden - I think this must please Jesus very much, just as it did when Mary sat down. Amen.

¹ From *Gracias!* By Henri J.M. Nouwen