

PENTECOST 9 SUNDAY July 17th 2016

Doing Good work or God's work?

Scripture Luke 10:38-42

Reflection by Peggy Jensen

The biblical scholar Fred B. Craddock comments: "If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to do and a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment." Gathering S/A 2007 p. 14

Prayer: Compassionate God, we know you are present in this house of worship. Draw each of us to sit at your feet and listen to your words. Help us to set aside all that would distract us from receiving you. Center our restless minds; and soothe our anxious hearts; quiet our tired bodies; call to our thirsty souls. Dear Christ, be gentle with us as we are, lead us to the better part of life which you have in mind for us today. Amen.

{If you are reading this printed version you may have missed the scripture drama in church where Martha told her side of the story. Then Norman appeared complaining that he and Nick were supposed to be doing some fix-up jobs around the church but Nick was in talking with the minister, not doing his share of the work. When Norman was invited to join them for coffee, he faced a dilemma}

The story of Mary and Martha is very familiar and women readily identify with the story. Was it different for you to imagine Nick and Norman having the spiritual conversation with Jesus? It is easy to see the stereotypes in Martha and Mary, but this is not necessarily a gender specific story. It does challenge the culturally prescribed boundaries of the time. As we know, the 12 disciples were men who followed Jesus and heard his teachings. Women were usually in the background but here Mary is recognized for sitting at Jesus feet and listening.

In our culture today, more women are likely to attend bible studies and prayer groups. There is an awareness that men's spiritual needs may not be met. I have a friend who has started a program called Manifest, offering men opportunities for spiritual retreats. All of us need spiritual nourishment. In Jesus we find the freedom to step beyond the cultural, social, and religious boundaries to focus on God's vision of inclusiveness.

We all struggle with the balance between all the responsibilities and expectations we put on ourselves and taking time to tend to the sacred in our lives. How do we find the balance between doing and being?

I know that I am a Martha at heart. I love to be in the kitchen preparing a meal and looking after people. I am a helper at heart. This was a challenge in my recent visit to my son and daughter-in-law, in New Brunswick. I was anxious to help but tried not to get in the way. On Friday afternoon my son Chris was trying to do some tidying up before his wife got home from work. He asked me to sweep the hall. I was so excited. I was having a great time with the vacuum when Chris told me to stop and go outside with Katie, my 4 year-old grand-daughter. She wanted to go belly swimming and needed the Slip and Slide set-up. I pleaded to just finish this one thing..... I did stop and went outside and Katie and I set up the slide, I almost had fun and I did

get wet. Why was it such a struggle for me to just be with Katie? I know one of the life rules I have lived by is ‘*Play after the work is done.*’ Now my life rule is ‘*Pray before I start the work!*’ We always have choice about how we spend our time and we choose what our priorities are. I trust that you have a personal spiritual practice for prayer and time with God.

What does this story say about doing or being in our church community? This story of Mary and Martha is so familiar, I was surprised to realize this little, 4 verse story, is only in Luke’s gospel! We know in the household of faith that people take on different roles as their service to God. Some are destined to live out their discipleship in the details of common church life, the hospitality of pot-lucks, counting money, caring for the sick and homebound, organizing outreach to the poor. Others are disciples in service to the word, study, prayer, worship and teaching. All of these are necessary, but we need to remember why we are doing what we are doing.

A community that is hospitable to Christ is marked by the attention the community gives to God’s word.

Sometimes a church community can get so worried and distracted by things like fund-raisers and stewardship campaigns and events that just perpetuate the institution, that they forget they are a church. In our shrinking and aging church population, a few people feel like they have been left to do all the work. I remember in previous congregations there were many mumblings about *so and so not doing their share.*

Here in this faith community there is an appreciation for the people who look after the necessary administrative tasks and those who take care of the worship preparation. I see that you are trying to share these responsibilities equally and fairly. Now that we are have shared services at 10:00 every Sunday, there is equal representation in the worship and work we are doing together. And if you are mumbling under your breath, try to not to be judgemental. Many folk are doing what they can to bring this Shared Ministry together. When a congregation works together to discern God’s will for their future, they need to take time to be still and listen for God’s voice. They also need to recognize that it takes time to come together as a faith community.

I am aware that our worship together is the only time in the week, that we have together to pray, listen to scripture, and listen for God’s word. Is there more we can do as a community to nurture each other spiritually?

Ted and Sandi have led a book study group for quite awhile, and everyone is welcome to attend. Some of you participate in meditation groups and prayer chains. There may be other house groups that gather. What do you want here? Should there be mid-week worship or Bible Study? When we nurture our faith, we also feel inspired and empowered to do more of God’s work beyond the church walls. Outreach is very important and I know that many of you are involved with the Refugee Family, the Friday lunch program and PHC. This is another way to look at the balance between being spirit fed here in the church and being active doing God’s work outside this church.

I want to share one more interpretation of this story. Theologian John Shea observes that while in English we hear that Mary has chosen “*the better part*” in Greek the word is translated as “*good*”. Mary has chosen the “*good*” part meaning she has chosen “*the connection to God who*

is good, the ground and energy of effective action.” He sees this story not as reinforcing a Mary-Martha dichotomy but calling for a recognition that God is both inside and outside. Sustaining us while summoning us to work in and through our service, to bring about a world of justice, mercy and peace. **It is not an either/or message but a both/ and message.**

We are invited to let go of our worries and distractions. Come and listen for the word of God which will enable us to go and do **God’s good work.** May this be so. Amen