

Pentecost Proper 11

Luke 10:38-42

July 17, 2016

The energy to be God's people

As introduced in John's Gospel, Martha and Mary are the sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus raises from the dead. They are the close friends with whom Jesus stops in Bethany just before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

The disciples' dinner with Martha and Mary recounted in Luke's Gospel takes place earlier in Jesus' ministry. The dinner follows on the heels of the lawyer's question to Jesus, *what must I do to inherit eternal life?*, and the parable of the good Samaritan. These earlier pericopes explore Jesus' emphasis on hearing *and* doing the word of God. What must I do, and who is my neighbor?

Now, Jesus is the guest of honor at the theology potluck at the home of Martha and Mary. The preparations have been completed, the house cleaned and Jesus has arrived.

Some busy themselves with table service, and others crowd around the honored guest. Probably some are wandering around the house or gardens, or renewing friendships out on the deck in joyful conversation. It's a casual kind of evening, a theology potluck.

How many would attend was a 'guesstimate' – people were likely just as lax about rsvp requests in the first century as they are now. Martha is understandably worried about the logistics – will there be enough food? Enough plates, enough chairs? Is the coffee ready to go, the water and wine plentiful?

Having helped in the preparations and greeted the guests, Mary then forgets her hostess role, and sits down with the others – a breach of hospitality, yet who can fault her boldness with such a speaker as the rabbi Jesus present? Martha's outburst of complaint is not surprising, either, given the logistics of hosting the large crowd – except that Martha asks the honored guest, Jesus, to intervene. A breach of her own hospitality, and undoubtedly an uncomfortable moment for Jesus.

Given Jesus' emphasis on *hearing* the word of God, it would indeed seem that Mary has chosen the 'better part' when Jesus is the speaker! On the other hand, what about the doing? Jesus does not demean Martha's role, although he does point out that her 'busy-ness' may be a stumbling block to discipleship. Rather, he commends Mary, who has the courage to listen, contrary to the first century social expectations of her as hostess and woman.

Martha's and Mary's story does not require us to choose between the listening and the doing, nor to proclaim one superior to the other, nor to set the listening and doing in opposition to each other. This Gospel story is about the nature of the hospitality which Jesus seeks from us. Hospitality is one of the ways faith expresses itself. Prayer, mercy, worship. Hospitality.

How *are* we to welcome the Christ into our community? What preparations are needed? There will be people in the kitchen – or Altar Guild in the sacristy– preparing food and drink. In Acts 6:3, ‘*seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom*’ were given the office of waiting on tables. When we gather as church community, we also attend to the Word, to the Christ whom we are gathered to serve.

Hospitality is more than the sharing of space and food, it implies spiritual communion, the refreshment and sharing of spiritual ideals. Hospitality engages the community.

Wrestling with, studying and nurturing our faith together as we share a meal is Christian community at its best. When we do that, Christ is known in the breaking of the bread.

It is relatively easy to fall into the distraction of details, shallow events, church business done in endless meetings that perpetuate the institution but ignore the nurturing of faith. Or to slip into the complacency of the assumption that the clergy fulfill the ministry function of the church.

On our boating trip, Dale and I visited the Anglican congregation at Ladysmith on Vancouver Island. We have worshiped with them almost every summer for the last thirty or so years. The priest welcomed us, and asked whether we knew the church was closing at the end of June. We were stunned – the congregation seems much like ours in age, demographic and size. Oh, maybe a little older....Of course, we asked what had happened. *Well*, the priest said, *they met together in February and decided they just didn't have the energy to be a congregation anymore*. We talked some more, and I asked whether she thought the congregation would follow her to her new call, which was the next nearest Anglican parish. She said she thought some would, but many would choose not to go to church.

The *energy* to be a congregation. That phrase stuck with me.

Was that Martha's kind of energy, or Mary's? The doing, or the hearing? I wonder whether the Ladysmith congregation might have lost the focus of the Gospel and the perception of Christian hospitality implied in today's Gospel, allowing their church experience to become, in the prophet Amos' words, *not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but [a famine] of hearing the words of the Lord*. Amos 8:11. Had they become pleasant Christians, carrying out the church's business, without refreshing their spiritual selves, without renewing community focus on the word of the God whom they had agreed to serve?

That some might choose not to go a little further to get to church implied a loss of energy to be community. When someone tells me they don't go to church, but experience God in the woods, or at the beach, I hear that their faith is expressed in prayer, in personal relationship with God, but not in community. To me, the Church community is where Christian energy is generated, it is the relationship which joins us together as the body of Christ. Our practices of Christian hospitality have a focus, Jesus who is Lord and guest. Caring *for each other*, having compassion *for each other*, sharing our spiritual concerns, strengthens and

emboldens us individually and as community for mission to the world.

Martha's and Mary's story is a reminder to check our focus, and where necessary, to "change our perception," lest we lose the *energy* of being the body of Christ. Our collective energy depends on being intentional community, and a regular renewal of community identity through re-collection of the fundamentals of community belief.

Our Christian way, our message, our energy, grows out of our common experience. Hear the summons to justice, to love expressed by the Gospel. Be outraged by political agenda that is indifferent to the uninsured, the homeless, the excluded. Merely denouncing injustice is not enough. Our worship of God is not limited to Sunday, or to theology potlucks, or walks in the woods.

We are disciples in different ways. For some, the details of our common life – preparing the meals, caring for the housebound, organizing outreach; for others, service of the word through study and prayer, worship and preaching, evangelism and teaching. All are necessary. No one should be left, as Martha felt, 'to do all the work by myself'.

The energy to be a congregation lies in its Christ center. In Paul's words in Colossians 1:28, *It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

I want to take a moment to talk about the reading from the prophet Amos. While we were away on our small boat, experiencing the beauty of our natural world, we enjoyed the 'basket of summer fruit' (to borrow from Amos). And, we occasionally picked up a Canadian newspaper. The US news reported was about shootings, more shootings, hate diatribe, 'loser' language.

These news stories moved our thinking from that evocative image of basket of summer fruit, the land's ripe produce, towards a perception of a rotting harvest, much as Amos sees the people of the reign of Jeroboam II – a people impressed and distracted by their prosperity and materialism. The people considered themselves self-made, they did not listen to God's call to mission, or they disobeyed. They had become poor stewards of the resources entrusted to them for the good of God's kingdom. Does this sound familiar?

Amos prophesies God's message, *"I hate, I despise your (religious) festivals, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* Amos 5:21-23. Amos does not shrink from mixing religion with politics and spirituality with economics. Amos calls the people to account, and so, I think, should we, with Amos as our witness.

I will close with these words from our Diocesan Bishop, Greg Rickel, which appeared in the Diocesan News review on Monday.

"This has been a bad week, on top of some of our worst ever. Once again, young black

men died at the hands of police. This is becoming routine. Then, Dallas, where a sniper or snipers targeted police, and specifically white police. We have a serious problem. We have accepted a society in which problems are resolved through the use of guns. We have accepted a society that worships guns. And it is blasphemous and idolatrous. It has to change.

*“We pray for the people of Baton Rouge, St. Paul, and Dallas and all those who once again mourn the heinous and senseless loss of loved ones due to gun violence and bigotry. Pray and don’t stop praying for the end of this, and even more **a will on behalf of our country and our collective life to take action, to use reason, and compassion.**”*

Please join me in silent prayer for the continuing energy to be the body of Christ, and the energy and will to be a nation.

Amen.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
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