

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

July 21, 2019
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 10:38-42
Genesis 18:1-10a
Psalm 15
Colossians 1:15-28

The other day I was busy doing things around the house...getting ready, picking up, folding laundry, when Dwayne called me into the kitchen. He pointed to the corner of the deck just outside of the sliding glass door. There, on the deck was a small sparrow. It had flown into the glass door and found itself unable to move. It was alive and breathing but clearly stunned.

We slid the door open slowly and I walked over to take a closer look. You all know how much I love birds. They are a constant obsession of mine and the area around our deck now boasts 4 bird feeders. It's an obsession that has carried over from my summers sitting in a yellow swing with my grandmother. On hot summer days, we would stop everything we were doing and sit on her swing and watch the red birds and blue jays come to her feeder all afternoon.

There was nothing that mattered more than those times together...the two of us and our birds. So when this little bird showed up, I instinctively knew there was nothing else I wanted to do but to make sure it was OK. So, I bent over and to my surprise, the little bird perched on my finger. I sat down and held it. Its eyes would open and close. It's breathing was steady and not labored. It didn't seem scared...although in that moment, I don't think it had the luxury to be scared.

Bailey, our dog, came out to see what I had. He sniffed the little bird, looked at it and laid down at my feet. For 15 minutes this is what we did. Every so often I would gently run my finger down the birds back. He would sway a little back and forth. Then he finally began to move his head. He looked up at me, then looked around...turning his head left and then right, up and then down. He eyes widened. And then he carefully stretched out his wings – checking them for any injuries. They seemed fine. So, he took a breath and launched off of my finger and into our herb garden where he took up residence for another 10 minutes or so slowly regaining strength. And then he was gone.

The miracle of the moment was the communion we shared...the bird and me. The day slowed down, chores were put aside, and we were blessed. We were blessed not out of duty or obligation but out of gratitude for the time we shared. I knew in that moment what mattered most.

I want us to think about gratitude in terms of this kind of faithful service this morning. The simple act of being with the people and things that are most important. Often times, when we approach the story of Mary and Martha, we create a dichotomy – the good disciple and the bad disciple. The one who gets it right and the one who gets it wrong. We uphold Mary as elevated

in some way based upon her desire to sit at Jesus' feet and just listen. While at the same time, we tend to snub our nose at Martha for her intense focus on cooking and cleaning.

However, such dichotomies become a slippery slope and I would argue these dichotomies aren't the point of this story at all. Maybe the point isn't who is the better disciple but who has the right intention behind their discipleship. In other words, who is able to focus on gratitude, not duty? On blessing, not burden.

To consider this point of view it's extremely important that we do not take the story of Mary and Martha out of context...which is all too often what happens. We tend to look at it as a singular, standalone story. When, in fact, it is part of a much larger narrative on this issue of right intention, of gratitude, and of faithful service.

Luke has been driving this point home for a couple of weeks now. Think back on our Gospel reading last week in Luke chapter 10...the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan had work to do. What if he had sat down and not rolled up his sleeves to help the injured man on the side of the road? What if he hadn't attended to what mattered most in the moment, with the right heart, with the right intention? His work was needed and it was urgent and he responded appropriately. That was the right intention because it showed the love of God.

Then, earlier in Luke chapter 10 Jesus tells the 70 disciples to look for hospitality to be provided to them as they go from house to house. He expected them to be provided food and shelter, and he told them to leave if it wasn't offered. Now to me, this seems to suggest like there had to be some very busy Martha's out there if all 70 of these disciples were going to be cared for. Hospitality in this case, was what mattered most at that moment because it showed right intention. It showed the love of God.

And then, in Luke 9, a man wants to bury his father before following Jesus and Jesus rebukes him for trying. The dead will bury their own dead Jesus responds abruptly. Jesus wanted this man to see that there was something more important, more critical to put his effort into and that effort was following Christ. That was the right intention at that moment because it showed the love of God.

Do you start to see a pattern in all of these stories? Each story shows that no matter what we do, we can and should have God at the center. And having God at the center means we will continually look for opportunities to love one another and to love God. Remember last week in Luke right before Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan he asks the lawyer what is written in the law and the lawyer responds...

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Folks, that's right intention. God at the center.

Here's the thing...we know work is essential. It's a privileged view of the world to think you don't have to work or someone else should do it for you so you can do the "real" stuff of listening and praying and contemplating on faith. Besides, whoever said faith was a passive endeavor? I have a problem with any perspective that would diminish the faithful hard work that comes from providing for one's family or from making others feel welcomed or from being a responsible, dedicated member of a community. Frankly, I doubt that is what we are supposed to discern from the story of Mary and Martha.

So, I hope you can begin to see that there is more to the story of Mary and Martha than a simple rebuke of Martha's work ethic. It is, instead, another piece in an ongoing narrative that helps us keep asking ourselves...what matters most? And when we answer that question faithfully, God must be at the center. Our actions, our work, our attitudes, start and end with love of God. All else flows from that point of reference.

One of the things that has touched me most over the years are the moments when I am able to sit with someone who is dying. When all else is put aside, when there are no more deadlines or chores or places to be and things to do. When our entire being becomes focused on the things in life that truly matter. We begin to say what needs to be said. We begin to confess what we need to confess. We begin to understand what many of us have missed our entire lives. That is that the love God, the love of one another, the fellowship that we share is above all what matters most. And in those times, the decision of what to do and how to do it becomes strikingly clear.

When I sat with John Mason, Marion's brother, as he faced his last days I taught him a song. The words were simple...

I love you Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you, Oh my soul, rejoice.

Take joy, my king, in what you hear, may it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.

And then John would gently go on singing, over and over.

I love you Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you, oh my soul, rejoice.

And he would sing until he would drift back asleep.

His heart was set on God and that is what mattered most. It gave new meaning for me and I hope to you as well about what it means if we truly claim that we will love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind. It gave new meaning to what it meant to be blessed. Amen.