

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

July 17, 2016

“Distracted by Many Things”

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our gospel story for today brings us a ‘tale of two sisters,’ Mary and Martha. It’s the most well known example in the Bible of the unique relationship of adoration and irritation shared between siblings. Their story of family tension is so easily our own. We love our brothers and sisters. And sometimes, or even often – they make us crazy!

I have two younger siblings – my brother is 2 years younger than me, and my sister is 6 years younger. Growing up, Matt and I were close in age and so our parents parented us very similarly. But when my sister came along – all of a sudden it seemed like the rules were out the window and she got to stay up until 10 PM and do whatever she wanted. On many occasions, I was absolutely more than a little irritated at my parents – and her.

And so as the oldest sibling in my family, I can really relate very well to Martha. Martha is the responsible sister. These verses don’t say that she is older, but I can certainly imagine that she was. You can just sort of picture the scene, right? Martha is busy in the kitchen, scurrying around, banging pots and pans together, making coffee, setting out plates and silverware and napkins. And then she realizes that she forgot the tea! Then the teacups and the sugar and the fancy little tea plates. Oh no – she forgot the tea biscuits! In her hurried, frenzied state, she accidentally knocks over the garbage can and the dog gets into everything and throws garbage all over the house. Then the doorbell rings and Martha is so busy in the kitchen that she’s hoping that Mary will just answer it, but of course she can’t handle such a simple task like that. So she wipes her hands on her apron, greets her guests, and goes back to the kitchen where she discovers that the chicken has now burned and is not edible. Can you just imagine it? I might have taken a few liberties there with the garbage and the dog and the doorbell, but you get the idea.

Martha is focused on hospitality – on giving Jesus a wonderful welcome. This is, after all, not your normal, ordinary dinner guest – it is Jesus Christ himself, sitting in her living room. He’s the only celebrity that exists during those days – It’d be like Justin Bieber, Mariah Carey, or Taylor Swift sitting in your living room. Aaaaaahhhhhhhh!!!! That is enough to make any hostess totally go ballistic like a crazy mad woman. Can you imagine how she must be feeling?

Mary, on the other hand, is focused on Jesus. She's got a celebrity in the house – it's Jesus, wonderful Jesus! And she wants to be near Him. She wants to learn from him. She wants to hang on to every last word he says and learn as much as she can from him. It's not every day that someone like Jesus is sitting in your living room. What we tend to overlook is that the actions of Mary and Jesus were extraordinarily counter-cultural. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, the position reserved for disciples. At this time, women were not allowed such opportunities. According to the rules of society, Mary is actually bringing shame upon her house, because she isn't fulfilling a woman's traditional roles. She isn't serving the men, staying in the kitchen, or whipping up dinner. Jesus also shatters cultural boundaries. Rabbis did not teach women, much less talk to them. Jesus, however, isn't interested in such guidelines.

A prominent theme in Luke's gospel is that God's kingdom is for all people. Thus, everyone is welcome to sit and learn at the feet of Jesus. I can imagine Mary is feeling an incredible feeling of love and welcome – the welcome that comes after being unwelcomed for so long. Mary's basking in the glow of Jesus, sitting at his feet, and absorbing everything she can. What a wonderful feeling – feeling free to be who she is and to listen and learn from Jesus – an experience of welcome she's probably never had in her life.

While we sometimes model this welcome, we must be honest with ourselves. We continue to be bound by unwritten rules of who is and is not welcome. Though we may not like to admit it, there are certain people that each one of us hopes do not enter the doors of First Lutheran Church. I am reminded of a powerful television commercial I saw several years ago. Standing at the doors to a church were bouncers, like you might see in a bar. As various people approached, they were either admitted or told to leave. It soon became obvious that only well-dressed people with neatly brushed hair or perfect married couples with 2 ½ kids were getting in the door. Everyone else was turned away.

Just as we saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan last week, the story of Mary and Martha reminds us that God calls us to dismantle these kinds of boundaries and barriers. The last person we want to see at this church is precisely the first person we ought to be inviting. There is room at the feet of Jesus for all people. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus made room for sinners like you and me. And ultimately, this is the gospel. Jesus says to you - you matter to me. You belong to me. I love you. I died for you. And I have come to bring you everlasting life.

That's why I'm grateful for the movement that has called itself Black Lives Matter. It has reminded me that the message heard over and over again by many African Americans is just the opposite of the Gospel... Your lives don't matter.

A recent Pew Research Study examined the racial makeup of religious groups in this country. On a list of 29, the ELCA was #28—the second least-diverse religious group in the nation. We are only more racially diverse than the historically black National Baptist Convention. I've heard lots of reasons for our mono-cultural identity, of course, including the fact that our immigrant ancestors came mostly from Scandinavia and Germany.

The point is that we, the current ELCA, do not resemble the racial makeup of this country. First Lutheran Church does not resemble the racial makeup of Fergus Falls. That may be why we are sometimes out of touch with the pain that racism is causing in our nation. It's not that we don't care, it's just that the daily struggles that these people face can seem foreign to us because we don't have to process that experience on a regular basis.

Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the ELCA, has called this moment a Kairos moment. That's a Greek biblical word meaning a point in history where things have reached a turning point, a moment you can't ignore, but must respond to. In this particular moment, one way the good news of God is proclaimed is by saying "Black Lives Matter." Not because other lives don't matter - but because the time has come to make a change in the church.

A year ago, "Black lives matter" became a powerful slogan, summing up the protest against the dehumanization of black people. Many white people responded, "All lives matter." Which is true, of course - Christians say this with particular conviction - "all lives matter" because God loves everyone. But it misses the point, which is that "all lives" have not been systematically dehumanized and discriminated against and attacked both literally and figuratively for centuries in this country.

It's like our neighbor's house is on fire, explained David Lose, president of the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. Dr. Lose wrote, "A colleague of mine put it this way: "When you see a house on fire and direct the firefighters to that house, you're not saying that all the houses in the neighborhood don't matter, you're saying that this one especially matters because it's on fire."

For Mary in today's story, "All lives matter" wouldn't be a very powerful message. Instead of focusing his attention on a large group of people, Jesus has Mary sitting at his feet, teaching her, talking to her saying to Mary, "Mary's life matters." That's such a more personal, powerful message. Throughout the gospels, instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said "Samaritan lives matter." "Children's lives matter." "Women's lives matter." "Lepers' lives matter."

As a church, sometimes we are afraid of talking about hard things. As a pastor, it's hard for me to bring up this type of topic because we are such a divisive society. We try to tell people that we can either believe that Police lives matter or that Black lives matter. Let me assure you that I don't believe that we have to become that polarized. Police lives matter. I am incredibly grateful to those who put on a police uniform and protect me and my family every day. Today's police officers serve at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to serve. Police lives matter. Black lives matter. Those things do not need to be exclusive of one another.

It takes a lot of courage to preach on this topic. And yet I know that we are called to talk about these things and figure out together some ways to love our neighbors who are hurting, whose houses are on fire. We know that their lives matter to God and to us. Can we do anything that matters, that could make a difference? What does it mean to us if someone's life matters? Matters to whom for what? More importantly, what does it ask of us if someone's life matters?

I've asked a lot of hard questions today and I don't have all of the answers. And yet, I know that if we hang out with the brokenness in our world, not protecting our hearts from the brokenness, but letting them break open too, then we will encounter Jesus. Because this is where Jesus is: in the brokenness of the world. That's what the theology of the cross tells us: look for God in the broken places. Find God in the broken body of Jesus on the cross, in the life poured out for us and shared in bread and wine.

Today we are all called to discipleship. Being a disciple means loving our neighbor and actively showing that love by going and doing. Being a disciple also means loving our God by sitting and listening. God calls us to do both. So, let us heed the call of Jesus. Let us turn from our countless distractions and show our love for God by sitting and listening. At the same time, let us rejoice. After all, Jesus meets us, even in the midst of our hectic, busy lives; and graciously reminds us that there is room at his feet for you; for me; for black lives, for police lives, for lepers, for women, for children, for those who have it all together and for those who are struggling to make sense of life. And - best of all - there is room at Jesus' feet for you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.