

The Rev. Devon Anderson  
Proper 11; Year C; Luke 10:38-42 (Martha, Mary, & Jesus)

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I've been spending a ton of time running and biking around Minneapolis' city lakes these past months, in preparation for a few triathlons and a very long bike race. As you know it's been hotter than Hades recently, and while I try to get out early in the morning ahead of the day's humidity, sometimes I can't get there until later in the day. I'm never my best working out in the heat of the day – and it's at those times, running around the lake looking like an over-heating water buffalo, that I secretly resent my trainer. “She did this on purpose,” I think, “She's trying to kill me.”

As you know, the Twin Cities are a wonderful place to be in the summer. Most self-respecting Minnesotans are up north at a lake cabin or resort, leaving the rest of us slackers the city – shimmering, beautiful, perfumed with whatever's blooming in the moment. Working out around the lakes is a fantastic opportunity for people-watching, or, if you are like me: dog watching. The dogs! They come in every shape and size, some obedient, some monsters, some barking at Canada Geese, some, like mine, obsessively scavenging for dropped popcorn or better yet - picnic trash. It's always a highlight to catch a glimpse of a dog-walking business called *Citizen Canine* whose workers wear bright orange and walk small herds of dogs on a multi-pronged leash around Lake Harriet several times a day. Isn't that the best name for a business, ever? *Citizen Canine*.

Because it's been so hot, the four-leggeds have been suffering. I watch big dogs try to make the most of it – dragging their owners toward the shore of the lake, hoping against hope that they'll be allowed even the briefest swims. But the little dogs – they are less successful at the pulling business. On Thursday I witnessed a Corgi who simply had enough. With a 110-degree heat index, the Corgi was just done. He had plopped down in the middle of the walking path, unwilling to go one more step. His owner coaxed, prodded, pleaded, and pulled to no avail. The Corgi sat down and he was *not* getting up. He was done.

It reminded me of when my kids were very little and just starting out in youth hockey. The youngest league – called the Mighty Mites – are 5 and 6 year-olds who spend most of the season learning how to skate and hold a stick. They play little games with little nets on half the ice. It's really cute. The best part is that during games, one or more players will, at some point, simply sit or lay down in the middle of the ice. They just get tired and drop down. Sometimes they are face down so they can lick the ice. Other times they are face up, staring into the rafters. No one ever comments or chastises or corrects. It's just what happens at Mighty Mite games – there's always a few kids just laying on the middle of the ice while other players skate around them.

In this morning's Gospel passage, Jesus tells Martha to take a cue from overheated Corgis and exhausted Mighty Mites – Jesus tells Martha to *sit down*. Just, *sit down*. It's a well-worn story. In it, Jesus is visiting his friends, Mary and Martha, and has brought with him the disciples - road weary, dusty and hungry. Martha busily moves about the house offering her thoughtful and careful hospitality - a ministry for which she is widely known – cooking, tidying, serving drinks, washing feet. Martha gets irritated with her sister Mary, not helping even a little bit but instead sitting at Jesus' feet, listening. Martha complains to Jesus: come on - she's not helping, and if

we're going to get everyone fed, there's a ton of work to do here. And Jesus tells her that she's distracted, to come and sit down like her sister. Jesus tells her to stop and sit down.

If you're like me, you might be tempted to default to the story's old and arguably tired interpretation: that the duality between Mary and Martha is about opposites, about a good way and a bad way, about the binary "doing" vs. "being," with "being" the clear winner. Martha is the "doer" and Mary is the "be-er." Centuries of interpretation have followed this line of thinking, used to legitimize lines between introverts and extroverts; contemplatives and activists; between modest, quiet, and restrained women v. outspoken, self-assured, assertive women. And worse, to undermine the ministry of hospitality – so often the work of women whether it be at work, in the home, at church, or in the community – as less-than, secondary, of little impact or consequence or import. But I just cannot square this long-spun perspective with Jesus' example of servant ministry to others, his profession of the two most important commandments to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. What about the parable of the Good Samaritan? What about the miracles of endless wine at weddings and multiplying fish and loaves of bread beside the Sea of Galilee? Loving service. Abundant giving. Radical hospitality. These are Jesus lessons, Jesus imperatives. It doesn't add up.

What if this story isn't about Mary and Martha at all? What if it's about Martha and Jesus? What if Jesus' intent was not to denigrate or deny Martha's gifts of hospitality? We know that Jesus deeply loved Martha. And, owing to the fact that he returned to her home time and time again, it's fair to assume Jesus believed her to be a faithful and trusted friend with tremendous capacity. What if this interaction between Jesus and Martha is not a rebuke, but the story of Jesus giving Martha a gift – something sacred and special, the kind of gift that can best be received sitting down?

I'm finding the foothold for my reasoning in an oft-overlooked phrase in the story – "***Now, as they went on their way...***" It's not even a complete sentence but it signals a critically important detail that, to me, shifts the story away from its tired message to something kind of exhilarating. "***Now, as they went on their way...***" The "they" are Jesus and the disciples and "they" are "on their way" to Jerusalem and to the cross. It is Jesus' last journey, his final earthly pilgrimage, not a day's outing or a casual drop-by for lunch. Jesus and his disciples are on a purposeful procession across the pages of history to the sure and certain death on the cross, and into the future which Jesus will claim, once and for all, for God. Somehow, in some way, Mary has caught on to the fact that Jesus' visit isn't like regular visit but the visit is of such significance, such urgency, that the routine must be interrupted. It's just not an ordinary visit. Jesus has things to share, like his last words of love for them, or his final chance to impart to them the strength and encouragement they will need in the brutal days and weeks to come. Jesus doesn't have much time, so this visit is precious, something to be savored. "Put down the roasting pan," he tells Martha, "I have important words to give you. Come, sit by me."

Some people think that the interaction between Jesus and Martha is about priorities – Martha doesn't understand first things first, doesn't know how to manage her time and set priorities, she doesn't think to put her work aside, God over service, that kind of thing. But if we put ourselves in that room, in the middle of that relationship between Jesus and Martha, in that moment in time when the sky was beginning to darken and the horrific days ahead coming into view – if we put

ourselves in that room - we can see it as a moment, just one moment in a long and intimate friendship. It was time for the woman who gave everything to sit and receive. The mark of hospitality is the capacity to give. Martha was doubtless very good at that, and she was busy about that very work, giving Jesus a pleasant time, providing for his needs and comforts, organizing his stay under her roof. It is hard work and should be rewarded, as it usually is, with appreciation and gratitude; but just as Jesus interrupts the routine of the household in Bethany, he also interrupts the role, for in that one, urgent and imminent moment, Jesus is not the “guest,” but the “host,” for he is the Lord, and it is he who gives and others who must now receive, even if for the last time. “Stop feeding others,” Jesus might have said, “so that I can feed you.” Stop. Sit down.

It will come as no surprise to you that I completely and totally get Martha. I sometimes find it very difficult to receive, especially in a “helping profession” like so many of you. It is said that it is more blessed to give than to receive, but often it is infinitely more difficult to receive than it is to give. Receiving can make one beholden to the giver, or cut away autonomy, or make the receiver feel vulnerable, needy, or dependent. Receiving makes many of us uncomfortable, despite how much we need it, or even crave it. But receiving, as Jesus teaches us this morning, is as much a part of the spiritual life as giving.

What we have this morning is a parable about life, about giving and receiving, about the presence of Jesus in the midst of the ordinary that – because we allow ourselves to receive -- becomes extraordinary. It is a parable about a woman who gives Jesus an opportunity to teach an enormously important lesson for our time. It is a parable, even, about our own worship, reminding us what we do in church every Sunday is allow Jesus to fill us up so that we can go back out into the world to do what we’ve been called to do. It is a weekly letting down of our guard and allowing our fellow parishioners to serve us – greet us, read to us, sing to us, serve us bread and wine – and to take that gift inside of ourselves, to really receive it and allow it to enlarge our hearts, broaden our minds, and change our lives.

I want to end with a little story about you and about me. On Friday Trinity hosted the funeral of Woody Jewett. The heat index was 110 degrees – and our un-air-conditioned sanctuary was FULL, like Christmas-Eve-Family-Service full. We ran out of bulletins. We ran out of pews. Some people ran out of patience. The sanctuary was literally a steam bath, and no match for the noisy, lonely fan, wheezing out little gusts of hot air at passers-by. It was all I could handle to gather the family out of the chaos, pray with them, calm them, and guide them safely into the sanctuary for the start of the service. And I caught myself thinking – “maybe I should let the other clergy process and I’ll stay behind and help get chairs out in the Narthex, and make sure the additional bulletins Sarah is printing get into the hands of visitors.” But then a cooler head came to me and I thought, “Nope. Trinitarians are handling it. It’s time for me to do my part, sit down, trust my people, listen, worship, and receive the grace of this moment.” And that’s what I did. And what do you know? The Trinity Men’s Bible Study showed up, each wearing a bowtie in honor of Woody, greeting guests, handing out bulletins, bringing in chairs. During the service, Ajit Daniel distributed cold water, treading up and down the aisles like he was hawking peanuts and beer at Target Field. Betty set out a huge bowl of ice. Gary coordinated seating efforts. Julie and her kitchen crew set up the parish hall and laid a lovely feast. Our Senior Warden ran to Kowalski’s to pick up extra food to feed the sweaty masses. Len preached a

thoughtful sermon. Eric played the heck out of the organ. And much to the clergy's delight, someone had tucked a row of icy cold waters behind the pulpit, so we didn't die. I may have sweat through all of my clothes, but sitting there at the feet of Jesus, that service filled me, as it did, I am sure, everyone there to celebrate Woody's life. The sacrament, on that sticky day, was in the receiving. It was in the receiving.

Maybe we take on a new vision for this last encounter between Jesus and his dearest friends. Sometimes the most faithful response, the greatest sacrament, is to stop, open our hands and our hearts, and allow ourselves to be loved. AMEN.