

**Sermon at St. Andrew's Church
July 17, 2022 – Proper 11C – 6th after Pentecost
by the Rev. Connie Jones**

Luke 10:38-42

I bet you've heard dozens of sermons, as I have,
about the night Jesus came to dinner at Mary and Martha's.
A few preachers may have suggested that Jesus was praising Mary's piety,
but disparaging Martha's "women's work."

More, though, ended up implying that Jesus didn't really *mean* what he said,
that Mary had the "better part" –
and he meant for his followers to strike a *balance* –
between religious devotion – and virtuous, productive action in the world.
And who can argue with that?
Certainly nobody who wants dinner on the table tonight.

But I suspect there's more going on here.

Notice it's not Jesus who *starts* the comparison between the two sisters: it's Martha,
who's annoyed at having no help in the kitchen.
And probably jealous of Jesus' attention to Mary.
So instead of just saying, Hey, Mar' – how about lending a hand?
Martha tries to enlist Jesus to scold her sister.
In therapy world, we call this triangulation, and it's not a pretty thing,
We first-borns know all about trying to get Mom to punish our little brother.

But in all truth,
haven't we all secretly wanted God to smite the world's evil-doers,
as we bask in our own righteousness?
If you don't believe me, I'd show you quite a few psalms.
I'd show you the attraction of pointing the finger of shame at others
in any day's news headlines.

So, here's a portrait of me behaving this way.
I compare myself often with others.
I blame them for their faults, and I blame them for *my* faults –
which I refuse to acknowledge.
I need constant attention, praise, and reward.
I see what pleases or profits me as a universal good,

and what doesn't suit me as evil.
 I insist that people agree with me,
 and I have a running narrative of resentment in my head
 about how the world, or some group, has done me wrong.
 Something is true if I decide to believe it.
 What I want I'll use all my wiles or force to get,
 and I create havoc in other people's lives. I consider it their problem.
 I talk about what's "comfortable" for me and I have the "right" to do.
 (Can you imagine Jesus talking about his rights and his comfort?)

Above all, I can't tell the truth, so I can never ask for forgiveness.
 Nor can I amend my life.
 If Jesus sat down next to me and said that Mary had the "better part,"
 I'd have no idea what he meant.
 Because I'd have no concept of gentleness, generosity, compassion, and love.
 Or the way of the cross.

It's too bad that AA's twelve-step program for mending a life that is broken
 hadn't been invented while Martha was rattling dishes in the kitchen.
 But the spiritual and psychological wisdom in all the 12-step programs¹
 was right there in the house with her,
 in what Jesus was teaching her.
 Ask me, if you'd like to know more about Jesus and the 12 steps.

But while I'm on the subject,
 don't think that the self-centered, self-righteous, aggressive life
 is confined to individuals.
 Witness these dangerous attitudes in
 countries, parties, organizations and leaders of all sorts.
 They believe force is justified at their whim
 and their opponents are always wrong.
 They lie about or ignore their sins, past and present,
 and use history only for self-glorification.
 They are an exception to ordinary rules of decency, always the center of their own story.
 The sun cannot set on their favored-ness,
 They are licensed to kill.

¹ Two brilliant and very helpful little books investigate this profound connection between the twelve steps, the teachings of Jesus, and a healthy spiritual life. See Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water* and Thomas Keating, *Divine Therapy and Addiction: Centering Prayer and the Twelve Steps*.

And of course.....God loves them best.
 Call it arrogance, or entitlement, or hubris, or simply sin,
 this behavior isn't attractive in individuals,
 and as Alcoholics Anonymous will remind you, it will lead only to ruin.
 As for kings and empires and nations – they fall because of it.
 A historian toldl you this.

So, what hope is there for us?

How can we sign on for what Jesus calls the “better part”?

Well, we can come to our right mind,
 the fancy word for that is *repent*.
 We might crash and hit bottom.
 Or the word of truth from a friend sinks in.
 It might come to us in a dream, and we are ready to change.
 But ready for what?
 Call it enlightenment, or emotional sobriety, or faith,
 or maybe just being a grown-up.
 But because we are never righteous or strong on our own,
 we must ask God, the author of mercy and righteousness and love,
 to empower us to change.
 I think we can trust God to be as gentle with us as Jesus was with Martha.

But the precondition is humility, truth-telling,
 and sitting at the feet of Jesus with an open heart and mind.
 We must ask forgiveness from those we've offended,
 repair what relationships we can, and change our ways.
 Often it's best to have a wise and kind person to hold our hand.
 A therapist, or friend – a grandmother or sponsor or priest.
 The 12 steps teach us this pathway. *Jesus* teaches it.
 It is the way of gentleness and love and the hope for peace
 that even our Vacation Bible School children have been learning this past week.

So, I wonder how did Mary and Martha's dinner party turned out?

Us usual, the Bible leaves us wondering.

But I imagine this.

After being rebuked, Martha says, Oh.....*right!* and apologizes to Mary.
 Then, they all smell the biscuits burning,
 so together they throw what's left of dinner onto the table and sit down to eat.
 Afterwards, the sisters wash up, and Jesus dries the dishes.

And there's lots of laughter.

The next day, all three go their separate ways, to help God in the repair of the world.