

21 July 2019

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Learning to listen

Well – when Phebe invited me to preach today I was delighted to see that the gospel was so short. After all – it is summer and the living is easy. So – short gospel so it should be a pretty easy task to pull together a reflection. As is my habit – I read the appointed lessons several times and sort of allowed ideas to roll around in my mind for a few days. And I can tell you – around Thursday I began to realize my error in assessing how easy this would be to write. Short gospel – yes – but oh the complexity of the message. It sort of reminded me of a line from Alladin when Genie describes himself and the lamp:

“Great big power, teeny little bottle.”

This story begins with Jesus and his disciples being invited into the household of Martha and her sister Mary. In accordance with the Middle Eastern tradition of hospitality, Martha likely began to prepare a meal for Jesus and his disciples. But –she quickly realizes that she is doing so alone – Mary, instead of helping, is seated at Jesus’ feet and is listening to what he is teaching. Martha gets a bit testy over the whole situation feeling that Mary could relieve some the pressure she is feeling to get the food prepared and have everything turn out just right. And then, when she asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her – Jesus chides her for being distracted and worried by many things when in fact, there was only need of one thing.

This is compounded then by Jesus praising Mary for choosing the better part. Imagine the pain that Martha must have felt – in her view the need at the time was– offering hospitality and comfort and yet – she is feeling unappreciated. For many of us, this gospel breaks down into a dichotomy of good and bad with Mary representing all that is good and Martha falling short of the mark.

I don't know about you – but I have to tell you, I can relate to Martha. Years ago when I was a just starting my career as an assistant professor at Northeastern University one of my responsibilities was to be an advisor to incoming biology majors, particularly those interested in the premed program. One of my advisees was in a special program offered by the university to National Merit Scholarship runners up. These students did not win the prestigious National Merit Scholarship but had scores just below those of the winners. The university offered these student free tuition, room and board and also a book allowance. Chris was an extremely gifted student who came in quite certain that he was going going directly to medical school after graduation. So, in an attempt to be not a just a good, but a great advisor I sat with him during orientation to set his schedule for first semester and scheduled a series of meetings to occur throughout that time so we could fine tune his plans. During his first semester I began to identify potential cooperative education experiences for him as that was a required component for graduation at Northeastern. You might imagine my surprise to find that at midterm he was failing virtually all of his course and had failed to show up for most of his biology and chemistry lab sessions. Unheard of for a premed major!

As a dutiful advisor, I called him in for a meeting to try and find out what was going wrong. Were the courses too difficult, was the load too heavy, did he need extra help? I then consulted with my colleagues to help set a path for him to try to salvage the term and even identified some peer tutors for him. While he eked out the term with a C average, we went through the same scenario second semester. I was almost frantic trying to figure out an explanation that I could offer my department chair as to why things had gone so badly with Chris. This was the first year of the new program and it was imperative to the chairman that in our department all of the students participating did well so that we could justify the to the university why the program should continue. On top of that, had my own teaching schedule to maintain, as well as an active research lab to direct. When I met with him midway through second semester to plan his sophomore schedule I reminded him of the requirements of the premed program as well as those for maintaining his scholarship status.

Needless to say – things did not end well second semester. And I was left feeling a good deal like Martha must have felt – working hard to do what was expected, to do what **seemed** to be right and, apparently failing miserably and not knowing what to do.

Now, certainly Jesus must have appreciated the service and hospitality of Martha and it is my hope that my attempts to be a good advisor would have fallen into the same category.

Remember, last week's gospel, which immediately precedes this story in Luke

was about the service rendered by the Good Samaritan to a stranger who was beaten and robbed. But the problem with Martha and most certainly me, was that we were distracted and worried. The word translated as distracted is *periespato* – which has the connotation of being dragged or pulled in different directions – a much more physically aggressive term than distraction. This worry and distraction leaves no room for what Jesus describes as “the one important thing” and that was gracious attention. In Martha’s case it was attention to her guest – Jesus, while in my case it was attention to Chris’ real needs as opposed to his academic needs or worse yet – my needs to be perceived as a good advisor.

Perhaps what Jesus was trying to tell Martha was that he wanted her to listen to his words, to be present to him and know that she was loved – not for **what** she could do or how well she could do it but rather for who she **was** as a child of God. And that in that listening she would come to the answers she needed through experiencing the love of God through Jesus. And isn’t this EXACTLY the promise that each of us has by virtue of our status as brothers and sisters through Christ?

But does this mean we should all be Mary and not at all like Martha? It is my experience that we are actually called to both roles. Each of us needs a delicate balance between work and prayer, between service and the spiritual, between busyness and attentiveness. The Martha side of us helps keep our worlds running while the Mary side of us keeps us

focused on God – and gaining his insight and understanding as to who and what we are called to in this life and to be the guiding light in all of our needs.

And it seems to me that now, more than ever, we need to be more like Mary and LISTEN – there is so much need in this world. But before we can appropriately serve we need to understand the nature of the needs. Madeleine L'Engel wrote in the *Swiftly Tilting Planet*

“Part of doing something is listening.”

So – what do we need to do? We need to -

Listen to the pain of our neighbors and their demands for justice. Each of those in need are children of God – just as we are.

Listen so that we can move beyond our own fears and prejudices.

Listen carefully to the words that will sway us to act in a merciful manner rather than render judgement.

And then – we need to grab our Martha moments and serve. Sometimes it is the ministry of presence that is needed – simply being available and listening to someone who is struggling.

At other times it is a more action oriented service that is needed. But until we LISTEN to our neighbor and then accept God's guidance in how to serve we cannot possibly hope to be effective. And make no mistake – we are all called to serve through our baptismal covenant.

How many time have we each answered the questions –

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

And responded – I will, with God’s help.

While we really do not know how the situation resolved for Martha – I can tell you how Chris’ situation resolved. Once I abandoned my distraction of wanting to be the ideal advisor I consulted with a trusted friend and had one last meeting with Chris before he left for summer break – but this time I asked questions that had nothing to do with his academic talent or performance. What I found out was that medical school was on his parents’ radar- not really his. As it turns out – while Chris had incredible intellectual gifts, particularly in science and math, his true passion was art. He showed me an incredible portfolio which he had developed during high school. After a somewhat tense phone call with his parents, the next day he and I met with the chairman of the art department and Chris transferred into that department to complete his degree. Since then, he has become a well known and highly successful graphic artist in Boston. What he doesn’t know is that he has also become a life long teacher for me.

I think God meant this to be a Mary world with Martha moments. We are called to listen to God and our neighbor and then act accordingly. These are exciting times at Epiphany. As we continue to move through the summer and focus on some new beginnings for our Sunday School, I want to leave you with this from the thought leader and author Roy T. Bennett:

“Listen with curiosity. Speak with honesty. Act with integrity. The greatest problem with communication is we don’t listen to understand. We listen to reply. When we listen with curiosity, we don’t listen with the intent to reply. We listen for what’s behind the words.”

— Roy T. Bennett, The Light in the Heart

Amen

“The word 'listen' contains the same letters as the word 'silent'.”

— Alfred Brendel