

St. Andrew Presbyterian
2010
Albuquerque, NM
Yates

July 18,

Rev Frank

LISTENING
Luke 10:38-42

Today and in two weeks our lectionary texts take us into the jungle of family squabbles. Perhaps you know all too well what that's like. Only Luke describes these family squabbles. Today's squabble is between two sisters. In a fortnight we will examine a squabble between two brothers. If you grew up with siblings, these two stories will sound very familiar. Maybe you are still dealing with such squabbles. If so, you have my condolences.

Two sisters, Martha the older and Mary the younger. Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. We are not sure if the two sisters lived together. One would get the impression from John's Gospel, where Martha, Mary and Lazarus their brother seem to live together in Bethany, right outside Jerusalem. But Luke does not tell us where this dinner party occurred. What matters here is what happened during the meal preparation.

Apparently Martha was trying to make a good impression upon Jesus and his friends. This was after all an important occasion and Martha wanted it to be just right. There was food to be cooked and the table to be prepared. If Martha had been rich, the servants would have done all that and she could have simply played the gracious hostess. But Martha needed help to get things ready. And where oh where was her sister Mary when so much needed to be done? She was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his every word!

Then and there the quarrel begins. Martha marches into the living room where Jesus is speaking and stops him perhaps in mid-parable! She tartly implies that Jesus is, after all, the problem. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me. In so many ways, Martha is right. For all of you who've had to "put up" with irresponsible siblings, you know where Martha's question comes from. It comes from years of frustration, always feeling that you have been "put upon."

Martha speaks for everyone who has felt obligated to "take care" of their younger brothers and sisters. From babysitting younger sibs to preparing a meal while your younger sibs just sit in front of the television set, you can feel Martha's chagrin. So let's not be too critical of Martha.

After all, her sister could have helped. But Mary could not bring herself to part from Jesus. What words of grace and truth he spoke. If only we knew what Jesus was talking about right then! Whatever Jesus spoke seemed to matter a lot and Mary hung onto his every word. Jesus replies to Martha tactfully but truthfully. He begins by repeating himself, “Martha, Martha.” Often when Jesus wanted to make a particularly strong point he would start with a repetition: “Amen, Amen” or “Verily, verily” in the King James. Here he repeats Martha’s name, meaning, “Please listen, Martha.”

And this is what he says, “You are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.” In other words, Jesus seems to say, “Martha, I wish you would come join your sister Mary. The food can wait, don’t be anxious about all that. Words of life are far more important right now. Come and just listen for a moment. It will do your heart good.”

Jesus tells the busy hostess to join her sister at his feet. He does not ask to be fed. He does not ask that they anoint his feet with oil. He simply asks the two sisters to attend to his every word, like the rest of his disciples. Because what we listen to, what we hear shapes and forms out lives like nothing else. Jesus will often refer to his words as food, the bread of heaven come down to feed our spirits. In the wilderness temptation, Jesus insisted that human beings do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Mary seems to get that. Martha needs to be reminded.

What we listen to matters. It matters a lot. The words we take into our hearts shape what we think and what we do and what we believe. It is fascinating the way Luke arranges his Gospel to emphasize this point. Right before our story of Martha and Mary is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Right after our text is the story of Jesus teaching his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. Luke seems to be saying that our doing, listening and praying are all deeply interlocked. The words we take into our hearts inform what we do when we see a man fallen beside the roadside as well as when we have the opportunity to pray. The basis for our doing and praying is listening, as modeled by Mary setting at Jesus’ feet.

The life of a disciple of Jesus is first and foremost a life of listening. We sit at the feet of Jesus and hear again his stories of grace and truth. Then we pray the prayer that our Lord taught us. And then when faced with need, we respond in a go and do likewise manner. But it all starts with listening and that is why Mary chose the “good portion”.

Listening is the primary task of a disciple of Jesus. We need to hear repeatedly the Word that is life indeed. We are invited to feast on the Word

that changes darkness into light, which changes our hearts and converts us time and again. We hear the words at the baptismal font this morning, "You have been baptized and claimed in the waters of baptism." We need to hear those words repeated throughout our lives. The Greek language here is insightful – the Greek words for hearing and obedience are closely related. What you hear in your heart shapes the concrete ways you act and respond. Hearing and obeying are forever linked in our journey of faith.

In our world, the number of messages inundating us from every conceivable media is simply staggering. The iPod, the television, the radio, the computer, the movies, the iPhone, the cell phone, the Blackberry, and the video games all bombard us with messages. All too often we fall at the feet of these electronic marvels in a kind of stupefied adoration. The message again and again is simply, "Buy this, buy that. You gotta be like this or that."

The disciple of Jesus knows that what we listen to matters a lot. That's why we sit at the feet of Jesus to fill our hearts and minds again and again. When is the last time you simply read through the Gospels, the story of Jesus? Why not re-read one of the Gospels this summer? Listening afresh to those demanding words of Jesus will bring us grace and truth. As well as hope and life and love.

A final word to our Triennium participants. This coming week you will hear some amazing words from some amazing people. I hope you will go with a listening heart. I attended the 1983 Triennium at Purdue. It is still the best event I ever experienced in all my years in the Presbyterian Church. Why? Because of what I saw and heard of the way God moves in the lives of young people from around the world. This can be one of the great spiritual feasts of your life if you will go with a listening heart. I hope you will be like Mary all week, listening intently for the way the Spirit is calling you and shaping you.

So the challenge this morning is very simple. Listen. Be still and attentive. Listen for those words of grace and truth that Jesus offers. In this place of worship and study and fellowship, we come to hear words that refresh us and renew our spirits. We come to be formed by the Word. May our words and deeds embody that living Word that is life indeed. Listening is the first and foremost calling of a disciple of Jesus Christ. Mary got it. Do we?