

St. Paul's MV 7/20/25

Proper 11C
Amos 8: 1-12
Psalm 52
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10: 38-42

My paternal grandmother, Rilla, after whom I was named, was a bit of a task master. As an example, it was Nana, as I called her, who, prior to my birth, declared that if the baby my parents were expecting were a girl, then that baby would be named for her. . . quite a demand from a mother-in-law. . . or a mother. And, it must have been difficult for my mother, who did, indeed, give birth to a girl baby, to graciously say, "Okay" to the name Rilla for her first and only baby -even though Mom would have preferred to name me Peggy or Diane. But my mother's M.I.L., Rilla, had made the declaration – and so I ended up with a very unusual name – and often one I was teased about...though I like it now.

Rilla was a Christian Scientist and held many strong beliefs that she shared freely– among them a strong work ethic. Her house was impeccably clean. She often quoted the adage, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." As a little girl, when I thought about God and cleaning my room, or doing the dishes, I wasn't sure what one had to do with another, but I knew that my grandmother had a strong faith, and so I reckoned that, according to her, anyway, things needed to be spotless in order to be right with God .

The phrase, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," is attributed to John Wesley, and first quoted by him in a sermon in 1778. But the idea that God loves a hard worker and/or a clean house (particularly when company is coming) is ancient and often showed up in Babylonian and Hebrew religious tracts. Indeed, the notion of hospitality, on which this gospel story is loosely based, dates back to Fr. Abraham, who, as told in Genesis, welcomed

three guests to his tent – two angels and the Lord. I’m sure he – or more likely his wife Sarai, scurried about tidying up, preparing a meal, as they welcomed the heavenly three, offering water so that the travelers could wash their feet – as was the custom. This work ethic has carried on through the ages, and many of us have learned its lessons. Perhaps you were cajoled by a parent or grandparent into hours of deep cleaning – especially when company was coming. Perhaps you have been taught, directly or indirectly, that there is *virtue in cleanliness*. Cleanliness **is a proactive step** in terms of our health - less exposure to germs and viruses. Cleanliness does have its rewards...but virtues? I’m not sure.

Certainly, in today’s gospel lesson, Martha’s intense interest in presenting a good meal in a clean house is evident. . . Company coming? Clean the house. Jesus? Best to have a full meal too. *Hospitality then* would have assumed not only a topnotch meal, but also making sure the dwelling looked as good as it could, including sweeping the dust from the.... dirt floor and having water and towels ready to refresh the tired travelers. So, Martha, after greeting Jesus, did what **females of the time were expected to do**. She excused herself to ready the meal. It would have been quite a feat to welcome and feed Jesus and his 12 disciples plus probably a few hangers-on, and so, in her defense, she had her hands full, given the rigidity of gender expectations in this era. Mary, on the other hand, ignored the roll of the woman and instead sat at Jesus’ feet. Martha then seemed to be peeved at being left on her own in the kitchen – almost as if her work became more *about her* rather than about servanthood. And so she protested in much the same way that my own three children did.... “left ME...to do all the work by MYSELF.... ****Tell her to help ME!!” and “Don’t you care?” *Well, Martha, as a matter of fact, yes, Jesus does care*. Martha, by not paying attention to Jesus’ lessons, missed the fact that the kind of hospitality that Jesus

was teaching was of a different sort...a radical hospitality that welcomed all and probably encouraged each person to find a place at the table – or at his feet. A place that might welcome and encourage women in any era into discussions usually reserved for men.

This text, seems to make a strong case for the contemplative life over the busy life of servanthood as it celebrates the good choices of Mary (who sat, listened, and learned) over Martha, who busied herself in the kitchen. That interpretation has been met with opposition from many including John Calvin. Martha, after all, embraced the role of females of her time – diligent servanthood, and she was later chided for it, while Mary succeeded in taking on a man's roll in learning. ***We need both Marthas and Mary's in the world.*** We need to be contemplative, prayerful learners AND we need to be servants in the world too. ***We need to pay attention to what God is calling us to do. Being distracted makes it difficult to listen for God's voice.***

Jesus told Martha that she was *distracted* by many things. *Distracted* actually means pulled apart – or pulled in different directions. *You ever feel pulled in different directions? What, usually, is the outcome of feeling pulled in different directions? Frustration? Inability to serve both ends? A bit of anger?* Jesus invited Martha to slow down and go deeper, to *consider why* she was making the choices she was making, to consider why her busyness kept her away from sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to the voice of God calling to her. If I could rewrite the story, I'd have both Mary and Martha at Jesus' feet, listening. Afterwards, the two of them and their 13 or so guests could have repaired to the kitchen, poured some wine, and, together, cut up breads and vegetables, perhaps made a nice humus, and together discussed the main points they heard from Jesus.... culturally unbelievable.... but I think closer to what Jesus was teaching.

The story of Martha and Mary is about attentiveness, I think, and tied to Jesus's radical hospitality and his call for the inclusion of all – particularly in gender equality rolls, which we learn from our elders. As a little girl, going to church, I remember Rev. George and Rev. Tom, but I never remember a Rev. Linda.... or even a girl acolyte that I *might have wanted* to try. No, worship ministries were in a men's realm and girls need not apply. (Sadly, this is true of many denominations and faith groups to this day...) But, on July 29, 1974, eleven women broke the barriers to the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion by submitting themselves to God's will...and the chastisement of many, by being ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church in a service in Philadelphia. Several courageous, rebellious, and ***soon-to-retire*** bishops acted in the sacrament and in defiance to a church that was not ordaining women at the time. Though there were no specific canons that prohibited ordination of women, there was (and still is) a requirement for recommendation for ordination from the Standing Committee, and, *in this case, of course that requirement was not met*. Many Episcopalians were very upset that the eleven women had no such recommendation from their Standing Committee and were ordained anyway. *Others in the church were ready for change*. Two weeks later, on August 15, 1974, the House of Bishops met in an emergency session, denounced the ordinations, called them invalid, and filed charges against the bishops who ordained the eleven women. Attempts were made to keep the women from performing priestly duties. Two years later, in September 1976, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in their usual meeting, **approved** the ordination of women to the priesthood and to the episcopate. Change had occurred, but it was not smooth nor easy. It is no mere coincidence, I don't think, that the Philadelphia Eleven, as those first ordained women were called, were ordained on July 29,

which is the Feast of Mary and Martha. Theirs is a story of radical inclusion, of transformation and of the proclaiming of the Kingdom of God, which is boundaryless. None of that is easy, because change is involved.

Gender roles are learned from our elders. Mine taught me that a clean house and hard work are some of what God expects of me, a female Christian. But gender roles change and grow...and that is good, and we must listen to God calling to us, by being attentive...by setting aside the noise and distractions of the world and listening to God.

Where do you hear God's voice? Each of us would answer differently to that question. If you have, occasionally a hard time finding God's voice, go to the places where you have experienced God before. That might be church, fed by Word and Sacrament, or it could be in nature, near a stream or in the mountains, or on the beach - all places where it is possible to simply be in the beauty of creation. Similarly, it could be in the experience of God in art- music, poetry, color, dance. Have you been touched by God in music? Me too. In whatever way God calls to you, set aside those worldly chores, societal distractions and learned expectations just for a time, and respond to God's call to you. Be attentive. Being truly whole might involve something new and perhaps it requires each of us to let go of the things we are tired of, the things that society has taught us, the things that may take us away from simply hearing God's voice. Busyness can do that. **Attentiveness to God's voice is a practice, a choice and a gift:**

Mary Oliver, a poet whom I deeply admire wrote a short poem that sums things up well: *Instructions for Living a Life*

*Pay attention
Be astonished
Tell about it.
AMEN.*

