

Proper 11 Year C

“Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing”

When I was in the process of discerning a call to the priesthood I often found myself anxious and fretful, unsure about how things might turn out. Katharine and I spent many nights crying at the dinner table over the uncertainty of it all...how would we pay for three children's education... what would leaving home as a family for the first time be like...what would it be like living in a big city eight hundred and fifty miles from the only home we knew...a new doctor, a new dentist, new hair stylist, car tags...and sure enough as friends had told us we found the physical moving itself incredibly disorienting...waking up in the middle of the night in a strange room...the bathroom not where it was supposed to be...It was the hardest thing our family ever had to do...and the best thing.

During the discernment process I was fortunate to have a fine mentor and friend who at the time was the rector of Nativity parish in Dothan...he would listen patiently to my vacillations between being all fired up and certain.... to my fears and doubts....and one day he told me that amid the highs and the lows...the stress and strain....the elation and the fear...to keep my eyes on the horizon...to look far down the road as best I could and affix my eyes on the purpose of all this in the first place....It was good advice... but hard work to actually do it...this paying attention to the heart of the matter....the meaning of why we are here...the trajectory of being human, made in God's image....it is still hard work for me.

In last week's Gospel reading we heard a story about how to love our neighbor...in this passage read today which follows directly after the story of the good Samaritan we hear a story about how to love God...and of course the two...love of neighbor and love of God are intimately connected...inseparable...we are being told in this gospel the true nature of ourselves...who we are and to what purpose we are called...a glimpse of the horizon of being....the horizon glimpsed in our daily life's work, the horizon both far and very near....we would see it, if we would but pay attention.

The story today is a familiar one, brief...the story of Martha and Mary being paid a visit by Jesus on his way to Jerusalem...Martha receives Jesus into her home...we are told her sister Mary was with her...Martha is busy preparing the meal while Mary is listening to Jesus teach...Martha asks Jesus to encourage Mary to help out with the work in the house...and Jesus says to Martha that Mary has chosen the better part....we've all heard the

sermon preached that it is better to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen than to be burdened with busyness...the preacher often exhorts us to turn away from the busyness of life, the distractions of the every day... and look to Jesus for true meaning....Like that's possible

But let's take a little closer look: The Greek word for tasks, that which has Martha distracted, is *deaconos*....which means servant minister...It's the word from which we get the word deacon...the two women are referred to as sisters, but in light of the context of Martha being called minister, Mary is more likely to be a sister in the faith...Earlier in Chapter ten Jesus sends the seventy out two by two to announce and enact God's good news...so Mary and Martha here...are two partners in ministry. On the surface this setting is a typical domestic scene which becomes a metaphor for much more...a metaphor that has the horizon in mind...this snapshot of Mary and Martha is a composite of how to do effective ministry, which in short is how we love God, how we are meant to live....certainly this is not about choosing between the work of ministry on the one hand, and the contemplation on the word on the other...instead, Luke is telling us we need both....Hard work of the everyday, and enlightened and inspired dispensation toward the horizon, the word calling us....the horizon, the literal intersection point between heaven and earth.

Martha is worn out...not from her many so-called tasks...Martha is worn out from much ministry, much living...and Jesus is telling her that the better part for her right now is the source...the living word, which rejuvenates, renews and empowers....the horizon, the intersection point, of the true self and the divine that calls us...inspires us into the future, our exhaustion and frustration and fear notwithstanding...Jesus tells her that amid her vital work, her warm hospitality, her ministry, she is to raise her eyes to the horizon...the word, the truth, from the beginning, the word that will always be...raise her eyes to the endless horizon of imaginative possibility, which is the life of faith....raise her eyes to the possibility of God's gracious commonweal in earth in our own day...the possibility of compassion and mercy and justice and peace....the possibility of a world made new quite literally through our artful sacrifice....that our work belongs to God's promise of the good...that there is always a way ahead...that is good news.

What Luke is telling us here dear people of God is that Christian ministry is full time work...and not just the busy work, though the busy work is vital...if Martha had left the kitchen and joined Mary at the feet of Jesus there would have been a lot of hungry guests in the house...Luke is telling us that Christian ministry is about the engagement of body, heart,

soul and mind...the health of each, the rudiments of mature ministry...he is describing the artful balance of living in the faith...and that takes everything of us...I think the real question for us, and it scares me half to death...the question is, are we willing to give all we are for this gospel? Our work, our enlightened intuition, our study, our worship and prayer, our humility, our privilege, our power...God wants it all...so that God may ably love the world into its perfection...and in this passage we are told how one might give all...and that all of us is all that is needed.

And we must find nurture in the midst of this our work, else the work loses its meaning and we grow tired and distracted...And we can't stay at the feet of Jesus either, pondering every nuance of the knowledge of the word...we have to go out and enact it...word and work...word and work...the rhythm of the faith...the rhythm of the very universe in its quest to be fully known, and we known in it.

And another point to be made here is that we do this work and hear this word in partnership, amid creative conversation...There is energy and renewal and meaning in doing this work creatively together.

Amid the stress and strain of our work...and by work I don't mean the narrow definition of "church work"...I mean in our entire lives of sacrifice...our jobs, our avocations, even in our play...in our creativity and in our learning...learning too an act of sacrifice...amid the vital necessity of our work...in our work in every way our work is manifest...Let us dear Marthas and Marys, partners in the faith...let us raise our eyes always to the horizon, where sky meets earth...our eyes fixed on who we are called to be...who we really are as God sees us...and for whom we live our lives... Let our gaze be steadfast on the horizon of truth, the horizon of imaginative possibility, the very horizon of truth becoming known as we speak...and we shall find nourishment and rest and hope and joy...In our artful lives of informed and imaginative sacrifice, let us keep our eyes on the one needful thing, the one true thing in heaven and on earth...for in this life of love that will never end, the one thing is all we need..