

July 18, 2004
Luke 10: 38-42
First Parish
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Be Still and Know

The setting for both of today's scripture readings is the welcoming of guests. I came this morning feeling like a guest but you have already helped me to feel at home. I appreciated having the opportunity to meet some of you before worship today and I look forward to meeting everyone else. I trust that in the days and weeks ahead this setting will come to feel more like home, and I hope you will feel more at home with me.

These days, we generally know when guests are coming. You received a letter about my presence this morning. We extend invitations by mail, phone, or email invitation, along with the obligatory RSVP. We have some time to prepare. When that time gets greatly shortened it can put us on edge.

For example, in one family the father had invited folk from work home to dinner, at the last minute. There was a flurry of activity at home, as the guests were on their way. Let's just say the mother was not totally thrilled at this unexpected development. Yet, when the guests arrived they were greeted graciously.

As everyone sat down at the table, the little girl of the family was asked to say grace. She looked, hesitantly, at her mother, asking, "What shall I say?" Her mother smiled and whispered, "Just say what mommy says." The girl, somewhat puzzled, folded her hands and bowed her head, "God thank you for the food. And may these people go home early. Amen."

Welcoming guests into our homes can be both a blessing and a burden. Welcoming unexpected guests ups the ante. In both of today's stories we encounter unexpected guests. They just showed up at the tent flap or the door. And in both stories we see the typical flurry of activity to welcome those guests.

Jesus just showed up at Martha's house, as the home is referred to, and she welcomes him in. But it's not just Jesus. The text says, "**they** (were) on their way." Jesus **and** his disciples show up at Martha's doorstep, and she welcomes them in.

Martha was quite a woman. From this story, we can see that Martha is a take-charge kind of person. She immediately busies herself in the kitchen. However, she isn't the kind of person who hides out there. We also know about Martha from another encounter between Jesus and Martha recorded in the gospel of John. In this situation, Martha goes out to meet Jesus, who has been summoned on the death of her brother Lazarus. She engages Jesus in theological dialogue, and she professes him to be "the Christ".

Martha is a person with many gifts. However, like all of us, her very gifts sometimes block her vision to the bigger picture. In today's encounter Martha's attitude is "There are guests in the house, people to be fed, so let's get to it." She has a hard time envisioning other options or possibilities.

This story has many slants and angles to it, each of which rubs us one way or the other, depending on whether we tend to

identify with Martha or Mary or the guests. However, one key to its message, I think, is its placement immediately following the story of the Good Samaritan.

As you will remember in that story a teacher of the Law, who has spent much of his life doing exactly what Mary does into day's story -sitting, listening, and learning- engages Jesus in conversation about eternal life. The lawyer knows all the right answers, and he knows how to play with words. When Jesus reminds him that we are to love God and neighbor, he replies by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with the story of the Good Samaritan, which shifts the question to, "Are you being a neighbor to those in need?" In this story, the message for mission is to "go and do." In other words don't just talk about your faith, put it into action.

If this were the only gospel message we received, we would need to be on the move all the time. However, Luke pairs this story of the Good Samaritan with today's pericope of Martha and Mary. Luke often pairs a story set in the context of men's lives with an accompanying story about women. Today's story about Mary & Martha provides an interesting and important counterpoint to the Good Samaritan.

In today's gospel reading, Martha is doing just what the Good Samaritan suggests. She is "going and doing", providing for the neighbor in need (Jesus and his disciples) who have showed up at her door. In the process (as sometimes happens when you are always going and doing), Martha becomes distracted and anxious, feeling overburdened by the task at hand. Martha gets ugly. Do you suppose she first asked Mary for help and Mary refused? Or, did Martha go directly

to Jesus and complain? "Jesus, you tell my sister to help."

Now, I have to tell you, from a 21st century perspective, I wish Jesus' response had been, "Come one guys, Martha needs help in the kitchen. Let's pitch in.", or "Don't worry about it, we can just order out pizza."

However, listening to Jesus' response, it strikes me that he knew Martha well. Well enough to challenge her. (They've had other theological conversations.) Well enough to remind her that the spiritual journey is not just a matter of 'going and doing' but also requires times of 'sitting and listening', of "being still and knowing that God is", as the Psalmist says. Food is necessary for the body, but the soul must be fed as well.

That's why we come to worship isn't it? To be fed. To set aside time for sitting and listening, for being still and knowing. Some people who are in the stage of life where they are caring for young children have told me that the worship hour is the only time in the week when they get to sit quietly for a whole hour. And other people I've known seem to find it the best time to be still – still enough to take a nap.

Worship is a time in which we not only tell God what is on our hearts and minds, but, also, a time when we try to be more intentionally open to what God has to say to us. As a minister, I find that, in worship, the offertory is often my time of listening.

About a year and a half ago, I was sitting in worship, during the offertory, when I had the sensation of someone sitting down beside me and saying, "your work here is done." I was startled and thought, "But I have no intentions of leaving."

It was ironic that I felt resistant since, when Ron and I moved west 16 years ago for Ron to work on his PhD, we planned to only stay a few years before returning back to the northeast. However, after two years of course work in Southern California, we moved to Phoenix for work, figuring it was still close enough for Ron to work with his advisors on his dissertation. As sometimes happens, the years began to multiply and we had reached the point where we were intending to stay until Karin finished high school. So I pushed the experience to the back of my mind.

Then the same thing happened again a couple of months later. So, I was less surprised than I might have been, when just a few months later Ron had the opportunity to accept the position of Associate Professor of Mentored Practice at Bangor Theological Seminary, and to work with someone many of you know well. He began his position last summer, spending the fall in Bangor and the spring at the Portland campus, where his office will be.

I stayed with the girls in Phoenix this last year so that our older daughter, Lauren, could finish high school, and our younger daughter, Karin, could finish 8th grade. Even though I didn't realize it at the time, when hearing that 'still, small voice', my work in Phoenix was done, and I'm very glad to be here in Brunswick.

How crucial it is to be able to sit and listen, to be still and know; and yet how difficult it often is to do just that!

Several years ago in a session with church school teachers, where we were preparing a unit on the ten commandments, I asked them to think about which commandment was the easiest to follow and which was the hardest. The majority of them said the

commandment to 'keep the Sabbath' was the hardest commandment to live by. Some of them had grown up with rules about the Sabbath such as no cards, no dancing, and no movies. They didn't miss those guidelines. However, they realized that except for Sunday morning worship, (which sometimes they had to skip), the day had become just another day to catch up on chores, do the grocery shopping, go to soccer tournaments, and generally keep up their pace of 'being anxious and troubled about many things.'

When you look at the Sabbath commandment and read the accompanying phrases, the focus is not just on honoring God, but also on the Sabbath being a day of refraining from work, a day of rest, a day of sitting and listening, of being still and knowing that God is. Now in reality, living in a day and age where so many of us have sedentary work during the week (unlike the early Jewish community), it might be important to have part of our Sabbath time today include resting the mind and moving the body.

In many respects it was easier to include the rhythm of Sabbath time into our lives when it was culturally supported. I was reminded of this by an article in the paper this week about an inadvertent action by the legislature in Virginia that *reactivated a colonial-era law giving Virginia workers Sundays off if they request it and subjecting employers to criminal penalties for forcing someone to toil on the Sabbath.* (Bangor Daily News, 7/14/2004, A7)

When word got out about the situation, employees began notifying their bosses that they would not be at work on the Sabbath. Well, you can imagine the reaction. Needless to say, the governor called a special session of the legislature to correct the situation. People will be going to work on the Sabbath.

Handling Sabbath observance is more complicated in a multi-cultural, multi-religious society. Each individual, each family, each congregation has to be more disciplined about having Sabbath time. And it is crucial to have regular Sabbath time. Yet, I think there is also a message in today's encounter between Martha and Jesus that says we should also be attentive to opportunities for Sabbath moments – moments when Christ unexpectedly appears and enters into the midst of our 'anxious and troubled' day-to-day activities and invites us to sit and listen, to be still and know that God is.