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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W27
9 Pentecost (Proper 11C) 8:30, 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 17 July 2016

Gen. 18:1-10a
Ps. 15
Colossians 1:15-28
Lk. 10:38-42

Listen

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing" (Luke 10).

Listen. Can you hear what God is saying to you? What seed is God trying to plant in your heart?

Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the twentieth century monk and mystic, felt convinced that every moment and every event plants something in our soul. He writes that, "For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of [human beings]. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because [we] are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love."

He goes on to explain that, "In all the situations of life the "will of God" comes to us not merely as an external dictate of impersonal law but above all as an interior invitation of personal love."¹ I feel so excited to be here and to be speaking with you this morning because, today's gospel about the sisters Martha and Mary, has changed my life. This story has become a deep part of how I respond to the world, how I understand God and to other people.

In church last week and this week we heard two stories that were always intended to be read together. Last week Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is robbed and nearly beaten to death on the road to Jericho. As he lies there dying the greatest leaders of his people pass by on the other side without helping him. A Samaritan, one of his people's enemies, saves his life and pays for an indefinitely long stay at an inn until he can recover (Lk 10).

The context of this story matters. It occurs in a discussion about the meaning of the primary two commandments: to love our neighbors and to love God. This first story is in particular about loving one's neighbor. In fact, Jesus uses the Good Samaritan story to answer the question, "who is my neighbor?" The simple answer is that we become neighbors not by sharing an identity for instance as Americans, or immigrants from Mexico, or Christians, or Berkeley graduates. We become neighbors by actually helping each other.

On the basis of this story it might be tempting for us to think that we should be constantly doing good works, that in every instance and opportunity we should be like that good Samaritan, that we should be perfect.

I believe that it is in response to this tendency that Luke tells the story of Martha and Mary. After hearing about how to love our neighbor this gives us a simple instruction on how we can love God too.

Jesus visits the house of two sisters: Martha who is anxious and worried and busy taking care of everyone, and Mary who sits at the feet of Jesus and listens. Martha becomes angry but instead of talking directly to Mary she does what today we would call triangulating. She asks Jesus to straighten out her sister.

Instead, Jesus says to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Lk. 10).

Contemporary biblical scholars point out that Martha may have been angry with Mary for more than failing to share the work. By sitting at Jesus’ feet Mary makes herself equal to Jesus’ other disciples. In a commentary on scripture ancient rabbis wrote, “Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst... [but] do not talk much with womankind.”² By supporting Mary, Jesus defends her right to be a leader among the disciples. This value was what most set apart the early church from the rest of society. As Paul says, for followers of Jesus, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

At every church I’ve served people have found the story of Martha and Mary to be frustrating and unjust. Often it offends just the kind of people I appreciate the most, those who roll up their sleeves and get to work in helping out. Jesus’ stories have a vividness sometimes exacerbated by upsetting our understanding of what is fair.

Ancient Christians from the fourth century however point out that Jesus is not dismissing Mary or her important work. St. Ambrose (350-397) writes, “Virtue does not have a single form.” John Cassian (360-435) says, “To cling to God... this must be our major effort, this must be the road that the heart follows unswervingly.” He says that we need to be careful of, “any diversion however impressive.” St. Augustine (354-430) writes that singing Alleluias, “is the delightful part that Mary chose for herself, as she sat doing nothing but learning and praising.”³

I do not know what seed God planted in you that brought you to this place but I pray that you experience holiness. Just by virtue of being here you have all chosen to be Mary’s for a while. And in our culture we need more of you. With foreign coups and continuing terror attacks. We need more people who have a deep foundation and are not merely swept here and there by the tidal wave of different events. We need people who respond to the world not out of fear, or a sense of scarcity, but with a heart of compassion.⁴

This is not just an individual project. The stories of the Good Samaritan and of Martha and Mary have special importance to us in these days of racial tension. Last week I came away from the story of the Good Samaritan with two convictions. The first is that people of color and white people will only become neighbors through actions. Our identity is of secondary importance to how we treat each other.

Second, our country is not defined by its geographical borders or by the peoples who have settled here but on principles of fairness, compassion, honesty and equality before

the law. At this time of global conflict, African Americans and other people of color, immigrants, GLBTQ people, disabled people, and the elderly may be the ones to save us.

Last week we had further reminders of something that anyone over the age of thirty has known for a very long time. African Americans and white people have a fundamentally different experience of our justice system, our economy and our social life. It is almost as if we live on different planets.

We learned this after the beating of Rodney King, the OJ Simpson trial, 9/11, the Iraq War and all the way down to the tragic murders of Eric Garner, Freddy Gray, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice to Philando Castile last week. Each time the tensions seem unbearable and we think that something has to change... but it doesn't.

That is why when a white person says to me, "well [while clearing their throat]... all lives matter," I just have to object. For me, this is equivalent to saying, "I feel so defensive about being held responsible that I refuse to listen."

My challenge for us this week is to resist the urge to defend ourselves or to jump to a conclusion and to instead try really listening, going beyond that moment when we feel the irresistible impulse to say something.

As a child I enjoyed the television show *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. One Sunday at church Fred Rogers took the time to really listen. What he heard was the singing voice of an African American man named Francois Clemmons. In 1968 Rogers invited him to become the first African American cast member of an American Children's television series.

Clemmons grew up in the ghetto and at first was not sure if he wanted to accept a role as the local police officer. Ultimately he did. He remembers two episodes in particular. In 1969 they were filming on a hot day and Fred Rogers had his feet in a little plastic children's pool to cool off. He invited Clemmons to join him. Clemmons said, "The icon Fred Rogers not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub, he was helping me dry my feet."⁵

Clemmons described Fred Rogers not primarily as a colleague but as a lifetime friend. One day as usual Mr. Rogers finished the program by hanging up his sweater and saying, "You make every day a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are." This time as he said it Rogers seemed to be looking right at Clemmons. When the camera stopped he walked over to him. Clemmons said, "Fred, were you talking to me?" "Yes, I have been talking to you for years," Rogers said, "but you heard me today."

Remembering it Clemmons said, "It was like telling me I'm okay as a human being. That was one of the most meaningful experiences I'd ever had."

Two commandments. Two stories. A world of complexity, tension and beauty. An interior invitation of personal love. A life of freedom and spontaneity. "You make every day special just by being you."

Listen. Can you hear what God is saying to you? What seed is God trying to plant in your heart?

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (NY: New Directions, 1961), 14-15.

² This is from a third century written account of oral commentaries that were already centuries old. Behind this text I think is a fear of strong relationships between me and other men's wives. M. Abot 1.45 See Herbert Danby, ed. and trans., *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 446. Reference from *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. IX, Luke, John* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995), 231.

³ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke*, Vol. 3, ed. Arthur Just, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 182-183.

⁴ When you ask people how they are, most answer that they are busy. We have more to be distracted about than perhaps any other people in history. This week Pokemon Go arrived at Grace Cathedral. You can download the app and look through your phone to see both what really exists and the virtual monsters that computer programmers have stationed here. They call it "augmented reality." Although I have been greatly enjoying all the extra guests who have come in and visited, it does make me wonder why ordinary unaugmented reality isn't enough.

I am glad for the Pokemon hunters who have gotten out and explored parts of this city that they have not seen before. But I also beg all of you to seek out ways in your life to spend time listening to God. Nurture the seeds of goodness that God is planting in you.

⁵ Clemons was also a Grammy Award winning singer who performed in 70 musical and opera roles and founded the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble. "Walking the Beat in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, Where A New Day Began," Story Corps, NPR Radio, 11 March 2016.

<http://www.npr.org/2016/03/11/469846519/walking-the-beat-in-mr-rogers-neighborhood-where-a-new-day-began-together>