

Jesus is teaching. People have gathered to listen to him. His disciples are paying attention but not always do they grasp the depth, or the personal sacrifice, or the generosity that is central to his teaching. With Jesus there is hearing and doing. Today he has withdrawn from the large crowds and is at the home of Mary and Martha. Jesus continues to teach. Luke, the writer of the Gospel, sequences stories, events, situations where someone seems to get it. Where someone listens, really hears and lives out, and into, being a follower of Jesus. Luke sets us up at the very beginning when the Angel Gabriel comes to a girl named Mary and proclaims that she will bear a child, a holy child, the savior of the nations, and that she is to name this child Jesus. Mary listens to God's Word delivered by the angelic messenger, asks a question of how this can be, and concludes with *"Let it be with me according to your word."*

Fast forward about 30 years. On his journey Jesus teaches along the Sea of Galilee. In the Gospel of Luke this teaching section is often called the Sermon on the Plain. It concludes with Jesus telling a story to clarify what someone is like who comes to Jesus, hears his words and acts on them. *"That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."* We most likely remember a paraphrase of that text from the song *"The wise man built his house upon the Rock."*

Skipping ahead from the end of the 6th chapter of Luke to the 8th chapter we hear Jesus tell another story. This time it is not about a carpenter, or builder, or general contractor, it is about a farmer. The story is about a sower who goes out and sows seed. Some seed gets trampled, some seed gets eaten by birds, and some fell among rock, grew up, but withered because of lack of moisture. And yet other seed fell among thorns and the thorns choked it. Some seed fell into good soil and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold. At the conclusion of the story Jesus called out *"Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"* Listen we are told. Often we are distracted. There are many things that distract us and which make listening difficult. That was the situation in the home of Mary and Martha. Jesus is at their house for dinner. Entertaining is hard work. Dinner preparations can be burdensome and time consuming leaving little time to truly engage with guests. Martha wants help and is taken back when Jesus doesn't support her request.

My friend Marge taught me to entertain. She was part of a generation far better at laying a table, preparing a menu, and gathering guests in a room designed with the sole purpose for dining and conversation. She is counted among those inspired by Julia Childs, and cookbooks that moved beyond Fanny Farmer. She taught me to entertain simply. She mastered the art of preparing what she called "one pot meals." She calculated the preparation and timing of an evening's dinner party so that she maximized her time with the guests. She didn't want to miss out on any of the conversation. She outlined a dinner party; start with a hearty cheese board and drinks. In advance make a mixed green salad. Add dressing at the last minute. Accompany it with crusty European style bread wrapped in a damp towel and popped in the oven to warm. Prepare an entree in a large cast iron enameled pot (This can be prepared the day before). Her instructions permitted you to take full advantage of time in the same room with guests. And being with guests was vital!

That day in Bethany when Jesus came to the home of Mary and Martha, Martha could have benefitted from Marge's entertaining outline. Martha wouldn't have spent the bulk of the time in the kitchen preparing. She may have spent more time listening to Jesus and spending time with her sister Mary in the presence of their Lord. But we know how the story unfolds with Mary not giving much help to her sister Martha. Mary positioned herself in the living room, sitting on the footstool right beside Jesus. The biblical witness doesn't give any evidence that there was a cheese board. But the narrative does confirm that Mary was listening, she was listening to everything Jesus said. She was feasting on his word. And when Martha came out of the sweltering hot kitchen thinking that she could leverage a little help whipping up dinner, she was stopped in her tracks. Jesus responded to her plea for assistance "*Martha, Martha,*" he said "*you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better portion which will not be taken away from her.*" The better portion!

Jesus' remark to Martha about portion has nothing to do with what is on the plate, how much gets ladled out of the pot, the size of the slice of pie, the amount of berries heaped on the scoop of ice cream. Here portion has to do with what is selected. The portion that is needed is the Word himself, Jesus. He alone is what will save the day, save the household, save the people, save the nation, save the world, save you and me. He is the one that provides what is needed. He gives himself so that no one need perish. He saves us. "*Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*" Build on the foundation that is Christ Jesus. Choose the better portion.

Jesus provides the feast today, his word proclaimed and his body broken and given to feed us, sustaining us for our work, nurturing us for lives of devotion and service. I believe that Jesus wants us both, sitting on the footstool listening and in the kitchen feeding but not anxiously, frantically, but lovingly as a way to provide hospitality. He is the better portion. Mostly we remove ourselves from his presence thinking that something else is of greater importance. Or we aren't even aware that we have removed ourselves because we are so distracted by the many things competing for our attention.

Last week we encountered Jesus asking a question of the lawyer "*Who was neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?*" The lawyer responded "*The one who showed him mercy.*" Jesus said "*Go and do likewise.*" In other words, did you listen to the story?

The question for us this morning; "What portion are you seeking?" Have you picked out the portion that will fill you? Have you selected the portion that is most tempting? Perhaps the portion that is most profitable? Or have you cleverly figured out the portion that is least demanding? How little can I do? Jesus calls us by name today. Perhaps saying it twice like "*Martha, Martha*" in order to get our attention. He fills our house with his presence and shares freely his Word of life. His desire is that we choose the better portion, not the one that is most appealing, or most lucrative, or least challenging or the one that smacks of tokenism. The better portion is Jesus. His desire is that we respond to his call ordering our days and our deeds feasting on his Word. He desires us to listen to him. With such listening comes a redirecting of our lives; our words and actions. Today the table is set and the meal prepared. We receive an invitation to the Lord's Holy Supper. Here it is that our loving God, made known to us in Christ Jesus, welcomes us, accepts us, and generously gives himself for us in love so that we have the better portion, so that we have life. "*Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*" Amen.