HOW DO WE RECEIVE THE LORD?

Colossians 1: 15 -28 July 20, 2025
Luke 10: 28-42 Mason Presbyterian

Today's Gospel reading invites us to go with Jesus into the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary. We find this occasion only in Luke, but what the Gospel of John tells us about them fits today's picture perfectly; their contrasting personalities run true to form wherever they appear. Martha is consistently portrayed as the outgoing one, always on the move, bustling with practical energy. On this day, with Jesus as her honored guest, she knows that only the highest hospitality will do. So there she is, out in the kitchen, whipping up the best dishes she can serve.

In contrast, we read that sister Mary stayed in the front room, "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." Each felt she was giving honor to their guest, each in her own way. Martha was forward in her busyness, and fulfilling the traditional role for a woman in that time and place. But Mary was seizing a unique opportunity she would not dare to have as a woman out in public, again, in that time and place. Here in private she could ask her rabbi and friend questions that were burning in her soul. We need to appreciate that each one had a legitimate perspective on the situation. What overworked Thanksgiving hostess might not sympathize with Martha toiling away in the kitchen, maybe managing to overhear snatches of conversation, but assured that her serving role was the proper one. Meanwhile Mary, oblivious to the swirl of activity and the clattering of dishes, sits at the Lord's feet. She listens to all Jesus had to say. She *receives* him gratefully.

Suddenly, here comes an indignant Martha, standing there and all but shouting at Jesus, "Lord, what's wrong with you? Don't you care that my sister leaves me to do the work all alone? It's not fair! Tell her to help me out!" Right then there must have been something of an embarrassing silence. Did Mary jump right up and head for the hot kitchen? Well, no. This is what we read: "But the Lord answered 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.'" Jesus makes a crucial judgement call in favor of the contemplative life.

Among other biblical passages, I'm sure this one has been cited within the Church across the centuries to prove the superiority of a meditative approach to the faith. In certain Christian traditions, to be a monk or a nun, for example, is seen as "what is better," as today's translation has Jesus saying. We may not all agree - we busy Protestants with our work ethic, we Americans who so often labor extra hard even at our leisure. The world certainly has need for both models. Some of the most admirable people I know are those who combine the best of both sisters. In this I include my own sister, who died back in the spring of 2021. Because of Covid, her funeral was delayed till September. I referred to this passage when I spoke at her service. In it, I remembered back fifty years to the week, when the minister at my father's service in 1971 referred to my sister as a blend of both Mary and Martha.

Martha is not faulted for her activity, but Jesus tries to have her see that she needs an integrating center to her life. The "one thing" Jesus says is "needful" might be interpreted several ways. At a minimum, he may have meant that she did not have to go all out to serve him up some feast; "one thing," one dish, would do. But it more likely has a deeper meaning, and that is that what is needed in her life, along with Mary and the rest of us, is to pay attention to his teaching, here and now, while there is opportunity. Time after time, including in many of his parables, Jesus stresses the urgency of receiving his message and his presence - again, here and now. All other things are "lesser" things, and can wait their turn. In sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary is not simply dreaming her life away. She seizes the moment, and "it will not be taken away from her." This truth is perfectly put in one line from the hymn we will sing after the sermon. Here it is: "Naught be all else to me, save that thou art." Look beyond the poetic and dated language, this truth is there: Nothing matters more than that the Lord has chosen to make his presence known to me.

It is Jesus' role to teach, and our role to listen. We have no idea what his teaching was that day. It's safe to say that its content was probably not what we find in Paul's letter to the Colossians. There we have three beautiful and closely packed paragraphs that speak first of all to the highest of Christ's standing in the eternal realms of heaven. It is a far cry from sitting in a front room in Galilee. Yet if we accept him as fully divine as well as fully human, this is the same Christ. Paul is

proclaiming the absolute uniqueness of the Son of God - “in him was all the fullness of God pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things...” As we read on, Paul makes clear the serious commitment his readers have made to this Christ. So again, back to the humble home of our two sisters, is not the message the same? Seize upon the present moment. Believe.

In this passage Paul claims he is bound “to make the word of God fully known.” Again, how much more fully could God “make himself known” than allowing the eternal “Word made flesh” to come right down and sit in someone’s living room, on this day, some “two’s” living room? God in Christ is ever the One who makes the most of each moment, urging us to receive and gratefully live in his presence.

Both Martha and Mary did what they thought best to serve their guest, their Lord. As they lived in the moment to do what they could, each in her own way, so that opportunity is ours also. The occasions are limitless in how we can honor our Lord by serving those for whom He lived and died. There is always a time and place for carrying out “things” that make the world a better place. Good, better, best - these comparatives are all used in various translations to modify the “part” that Mary chose, and she will always be remembered for her wisdom in the choice. So we also have our moments to live our faith, both in learning and serving, as they did.

But we best remember that it all began, not with what is ours to do, but what God has already done for us. Here again is the power of Paul’s Colossians passage. We have all we need from the hand of God, and this is the source and motive of all our praying. Paul’s expression is first of all that of thanksgiving - words of wonder over who God is and what He has done in Jesus Christ. Our worship and praise starts here, before we ask any thing of God, or even ask Him to be “present” with us.

Because of this, I’ve never been one to open either a church service or a public gathering with a “prayer of invocation.” To invoke God, asking him to “come to us” implies that He is not yet present unless and until we summon him forth. More appropriate, I feel, is to begin with a prayer of adoration, simply acknowledging God for who He is. This lines up with a short and simple prayer I remember our

daughter voicing many years ago, when she was about five. Before dinner, she said simply, “Thank you God for God.” This, in essence, is where I believe Mary was coming from, in sitting faithfully at Jesus’ feet. There are, as we’ve seen, various legitimate ways to receive and serve our Lord, but it all begins with recognizing his presence. We might even say that his presence is his present - his gift to us. He has granted it before our asking, so that the thank you comes before the please. This is what Mary, and Martha too, learned that day, as Jesus chose to came into their home. May we join them in knowing how best we now receive him into our hearts.

Charles Herrick