Love Is Deep Listening & Invitation to presence

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11C || July 20, 2025 || 9:30am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

We find ourselves mid-summer and four weeks into our exploration of the myriad facets of God's love and invitations for us. This summer, as an acknowledgment that time flies and we want be intentional about building or working on our spiritual strengths, we have considered Hope as a discipline – reminding ourselves that here we sit with our spiritual workout partners; we considered that we reap what we sow – and we are sowing seeds for spiritual insight strength and growth. Last week with the parable of the Good Samaritan, we considered God's love that knows no boundaries, and we were invited to demonstrate mercy to our neighbors – even if our neighbor is a Samaritan.

This week we are offered God's love as deep listening, highlighted by the story of our scriptural siblings Mary and Martha.

One of my favorite people, a friend and colleague who served as the Commissioner of Public Health for Massachusetts, was once honored for his public service and for his tackling of entrenched public health issues like vaccine hesitancy and racial disparities for infant and maternal mortality (here is a startling truth that haunted me when I worked at Health Care For All: during childbirth Black mothers die at a rate 3 times higher than their white counterparts. Even in Massachusetts, the rate, while better, is still twice as high. In our Commonwealth, Black women die twice as often as white women when giving birth).

During his well-deserved recognition and award ceremony a presenter noted that my friend Commissioner John Auerbach was "the best listener in Government". There were knowing nods all around the table where I was seated.

What a great distinguishing characteristic! Even in the moment, I put two and two together and connected John's ability to improve public health, even in thorny areas, with his extraordinary ability to listen. I was blessed to have been on the receiving end of his generous

listening multiple times, and even in the moment – sometimes during difficult meetings, his focused listening truly felt like a form of love! (Thank you John)

This morning, we have the story of Mary and her sister Martha providing hospitality for Jesus. Martha welcomes Jesus into her home (which is worth a pause, especially if it didn't make an impression a minute ago. It was highly unusual for a woman to own or be head of any household, and this is clearly her home) So, head of household Martha welcomes Jesus and then is busy going and doing around the house – perhaps tending the fire, cleaning, or cooking, setting the table – hosting! and her sister Mary is just sitting at Jesus' feet, listening.

I can easily envision this dynamic. Perhaps you can too, or perhaps you have been in a similar situation? I imagine several pointed or exasperated sighs escaping from Martha before she finally appeals to Jesus to tell Mary to help her out. [She sounds as though she is telling on her sister.]

But Jesus does not do as Martha requests. He does not chide Mary. In sitting and listening, Jesus says that Mary is doing the right and lasting thing.

When I was in seminary, it was popular to categorize yourself as a Martha or a Mary – are you a Mary, able to sit and be or are you a Martha – always on the go, busy busy busy?

Culturally, we are surrounded by messages of time scarcity; of value and reward being connected to going and doing. A full calendar is an indication of how important you may be, or how many things you are involved in. These days we can confuse "busy" for "good". "How are you doing?", we might ask one another. More often than not the answer comes back – I'm busy, or very busy. Could just swap out busy for Good! I'm busy is perhaps a place holder for "I'm well".

In the olden days – sometime after our scriptural ancestors were walking the planet and the industrial age; being idle, or enjoying leisure time was a sign of prosperity and prestige.

If you were not in the salt mines seven days a week – figuratively or literally – it was because you had achieved a certain social status that allowed for vacation or leisure. This idle time was valued as being important for the growth of our interior lives. Reading books, taking slow strolls with friends, relatives or neighbors were engaged in as valuable contemplative pursuits whether to spark intellectual insights, recharge emotional batteries or to commune with God in nature.

These slower, deliberate pastimes were not cause for embarrassment, explanation or excuses. They were valued as important restorative practices.

We've lost track of the value of simply being – of meandering on a walk, or sitting in contemplative silence, or praying as a daily practice that opens us up to God, and connects us to that still, small voice.

We are bombarded by external stimuli. We carry a device that allows us to be interrupted, or to interrupt others at the press of a button, and we've adapted to how vital those connections and those frequent calls, texts and e-mails are. We take our phones *TO THE BEACH*! [Do you know how obvious God is at the beach? .... very]...When was the last time you found yourself without cell service somewhere, or a dropped call or conversation? It can be wholly (if not HOLY ALLELUIA HELP ME BABY JESUS) diverting!

Each of us who makes time to worship on Sundays is part of a counter-culture based in part – I believe – in our commitment to this community and to connect to God, to spiritually sit at Jesus' feet and learn. On Sundays we squirrel away a little over an hour each week to read, learn and inwardly digest the ancient lessons and modern challenges inherent to being the people God calls us to be.

Well done us – AND – how might we amplify this worship experience, this intentional time for prayer and connection to God and one another – in our daily lives?

Yes, most of us are VERY BUSY! Yet, isn't part of Jesus' response to busyness that we are missing out? That is what he says to Martha – in your distracted busyness you are missing the opportunity to listen to and talk with God. As the Commissioner of Public Health in this great Commonwealth, my friend John literally had 70 different ways he could spend each precious hour of his public service – yet – he eschewed distractions and focused during meetings – put his full attention on the conversation or gathering before him, investing a gift of presence and strengthening the community there gathered.

These days we ALL need as much connection and spiritual communion time as we can wring out of a day. Without it, how will we experience joy, or live into the potential of our full beloved selves? Or make the connections to one another that represent God's loving kingdom here and now?

Jesus is saying to Martha and to us that love is deep listening. It is a gift of focus, an act of intention to sit, to eliminate distractions and to focus on God's loving presence. Jesus does NOT condemn Martha for her busyness. He loves both Mary and Martha - these sisters were his friends AND faithful followers. What Jesus is saying is that Mary's choice to sit and listen, is to experience Jesus' love, which will never be taken away from Mary.

I hope that Martha heard and responded to Jesus' surprising response to forego chiding her sister. I would love to think that Martha rethought her lengthy and distracting "to do" list and joined Mary in the opportunity to learn and listen to Jesus.

We include a few minutes of silence when we gather on Sunday. Perhaps those moments, the moments that follow right now, or those moments of quiet after communion, can be used to just be – to listen and check in with God.

Wouldn't it feel fantastic to be described as a great listener? Offering that gift of active and intense listening may not lead to any public awards or recognition, but surely it would mean that we had succeeded in offering love – the act of deep listening – and a meaningful presence that, like my friend John, would make this world a better, more holy connected place. Amen+