

In the Episcopal Church, the primary order of ministry is not Priests, Deacons or even Bishops. The foundational order of ministry is baptism. Each of us formally and publicly announce that we are on a spiritual journey by being “born anew” through the waters of baptism. On our spiritual journey, we all have a ministry to fulfill. We are referred to as the “priesthood of all believers” because we are a **vehicle** for God’s redemption of the world. ***We bring the world to God and we bring God to the world!*** Our ministry as baptized people is the most important ministry in the church! To prove this point, one only has to look at the achievements of the church over the past 2000 years.

**Great cathedrals and even parish churches**, formed by architects, stone masons, artists, artisans and benefactors. Bishops, Priests and Deacons did not build these churches. . . faithful lay people did!

**Hospitals** – is another common achievement of the mission of the church, Mercy hospital, St. Luke’s, St. Mary’s, the names of patron saints go on and on. Who made these hospitals? Doctors, nurses, benefactors, patients, auxiliary and support staff, a few deaconesses, a few priests, but the overwhelming push came from . . . you guessed it, the baptized!

The list can go on and on and includes: homeless shelters, orphanages, clinics, food pantries, feeding programs. Ministries that touch almost every conceivable human need were begun, run, and continued by the baptized! ***Why? Because as Christians, we are called to HOSPITALITY with a purpose! We serve the world as Jesus served us.*** Yet, as Joseph Fitzmeyer aptly states as he looks at our story today of Mary and Martha, “the *diakonia* [service] that bypasses the word, is one that will never have lasting character. . .” (Fitzmeyer p. 892) The reasons ministries to meet human need continue to exist and survive is because the purpose behind them is so strong. . . as humans bearing the image of God we have a need to love and serve. ***The relationship formed by meeting the needs of those who suffer meets a spiritual, emotional and physical need in us!***

Not all institutions carry names of the saints: Camden national, First national, Chase, Bank America, Ford, Chevrolet, Dole, Kelloggs and Kraft . . . they may carry the names of their founders, they may meet needs of human beings, ***but with a very different purpose, a very different ultimate goal.***

So we look at Mary and Martha today. What is the purpose of this story? I think one key is in the phrase that Jesus speaks to Martha “you are *anxious about many things*, but *only one thing is necessary.*” Jesus is not criticizing Martha, he is

teaching both Mary and Martha and us in the process. “Martha wanted to honor Jesus with an elaborate meal, but Jesus reminds her it is more important to listen to what he has to say.” (Fitzmeyer, p. 892)

We can relate to this story, I think, because it describes a party that we have all attended. You know the one, when the host or hostess spends so much time preparing the refreshments that they never have an opportunity to sit down and visit with their guests. **Martha is distracted.** In providing hospitality, Jesus is instructing Martha that *the basic things of course are necessary*, a little food or drink, (perhaps a bathroom!), but don’t let your preoccupation with elaborately impressing someone with a wonderful meal make you miss the opportunity to sit down and listen to the voice of your guest, you will miss the most important piece!

***This is true for Christian ministry as well.*** There are times where with all good intentions we can serve the hungry or staff a parish fair and become so ***consumed*** with our service at hand that we ignore the ***purpose behind it.*** **Do we begin whatever service we do with prayer to ground us, reminding us of the reason we are doing it and who we are really trying to serve?** Then as that certain person irritates you or makes you feel like you are underappreciated by those you serve, you have a better chance of letting their behaviors pass, remembering what you are doing is to fulfill a **higher calling.**

This leads us back to the Abraham story from Genesis – *Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent and is surprised as these three (supernatural?) visitors appear.* The Hebrew word used here is “***messengers***” which in Greek is translated “***angelos***” or in English “***angels***”. Abraham gets it! Hearing the words from god’s messenger is worth the interruption from being preoccupied with his other concerns. *There is one Jewish source that puts Abraham at the entrance of his tent recuperating after his circumcision. In that state he welcomes the interruption? Amazing!*

In the Abraham story, Sarah fulfills the traditional role of a woman in the proper entertaining of traveling visitors. *Abraham “hastened into the tent and said to Sarah: make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it and make cakes.”* Three measures of flour is about 28 cups, which will produce more than is needed for a “***little bread so you may refresh yourselves***” which is what Abraham told these messengers. *Martha in the story from Luke seems to be walking in Sarah’s footsteps, dutifully fulfilling her “traditional obligation” as a woman, and complaining that Mary is not. Jesus then calls Martha her to take the opportunity to listen and to learn, to be a disciple, which is in contrast to the traditional role*

*of women in Jewish society. Jesus is not there to be served but to teach.* Jesus seems to be advocating a form of disciple who is expected to be a *student in action, small wonder that students make the greatest great activists, their passion energizes them!* They are not concerned with impressing those around them with social graces, not wanting that to get in the way of the message.

Some of us feel more comfortable in Martha's position than in Mary's. We feel like we are accomplishing something, we are making people comfortable. But if we really want to accomplish even more spectacular than the refreshments we serve, **listen to your guests! What would have happened if Abraham spent all of his time tending to the needs of his guests and never took the time to listen to what they had to say to him?** He would have missed the blessing. By not listening to what others have to say, we too can easily miss the blessing! Each of us has something to hear, the voice of the spirit perhaps, if we concentrate on our listening skills.

What would the world be like if people spent less time talking and more time listening? Would conversations be clearer? Would there be less confusion or misunderstanding?

What could Jesus be teaching that is so important? *Collect: Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking. . . give us those things for which our unworthiness we dare not and for our blindness we cannot ask.*

As I said earlier, as Christians in Baptism, we all have a ministry to fulfill in our spiritual journey of life. We travel on our spiritual journey to be made whole, to be healed, to become in "peace" or "shalom" with God and one another. Each one of us has a particular strength (or even weakness) that is used in ministry that *heals us and brings us into peace and union with God and one another as we participate in it.* We have all heard it said "physician heal thyself" . . . in one sense this actually happens that we heal ourselves through ministering to others.

We invite others to join us on this journey into the wholeness of God. Notice the sign by the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham. This shrine, often called "England's Nazareth" began when the lady of the manor in of Walsingham in 1061 saw a vision: she was taken to Nazareth and shown the simple home of where Mary and Joseph had brought up Jesus. The vision was repeated on 2 separate occasions, which encouraged the woman to build a replica of the home she saw in her vision. This became a place of "pilgrimage" (a journey with a specific

religious focus) that the faithful would take (especially those who were not wealthy or healthy enough to make it to the Holy Land) to be in touch with the home of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. We don't worship the image of Mary and Jesus on the wall, it points to a greater reality. It is an "ikon" (the word that is used in Colossians this morning). Not the "eidos" or image of the real thing. It is the difference between a "Polaroid" photograph and a painted scene. One is an image of the reality, the other is a stylized "icon" or window into the reality. Colossians says Jesus is the "ikon" of God. **A window made of flesh through which we see, hear and experience the eternal message which is God.** An image which we each carry inside of us as human beings. An image of God.

Columbanus [615] celtic abbot write that: *It is a glorious privilege that God should grant us his eternal image and the likeness of [God's] character. . . the image we depict must not be that of one who is unlike God; for one who is harsh and irascible and proud would display the image of a despot. Let us not imprint ourselves the image of a despot, but let Christ paint his image in us with his words: "my peace I give you, my peace I leave with you". **But the knowledge that peace is good is of no benefit to us if we do not practice it.** The most valuable objects are usually the most fragile; costly things require the most careful handling. Particularly fragile is that which is lost by wanton talk and destroyed with the slightest injury of a brother or sister. People like nothing better than discussing and minding the business of others, passing superfluous comments at random and criticizing people behind their backs. So those who cannot say "the lord has given me a discerning tongue, that I may with a word support those who are weary" should keep silent, or if they do say anything it should promote peace.* (Daily Office from the Early Church, p. 57)