

This is the Sunday that I sometimes think of as the one set aside to reflect on a group of hard-workers in our church community: all the people who do much of the grunt work of keeping our wheels greased and gears turning. I say this as someone who, like our deacon, is married to a member of the Altar Guild. These folks, still mostly women, are the ones who launder and iron, fill cruets with wine and see to it that the loaves of communion bread are defrosted, refill our fake candles with the oil they burn so that they will not flicker out during worship.

I can tell you from the many conversations in our home, that there is a fair amount of anxiety involved in getting all these tasks portioned out and done. We sit here on a Sunday morning benefitting from all their silent work as well as that of those who type the bulletins, serve as ushers and greet visitors. So how does it feel to them to hear Jesus' implied criticism of their patron saint? "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."

One possible response would be to reply, "Easy for you to say, but without my work there will be no dinner." The corollary here is 'no preparation, no Eucharist.' Perhaps we need to untangle all this just a bit.

Luke is writing in the era of house churches. In his day meetings for worship and study took place in private homes. Someone who owned a house served as the host for the worship of a gathered group of believers. That is Martha's role here. We should note that the home into which Jesus and his followers were welcomed belonged to Martha, who was probably the older of the two sisters. And the work of preparation which she carried is translated from the Greek, *diakonia*, that is deacon.

So, Jesus was not criticizing Martha for what she was doing. It was a genuine role of hospitality, and hospitality was seen as critical in the church. But Jesus is noticing the anxiety that consumes her in the tasks. She is fussing around, distracted and unfocused. There is so much for which she feels responsible, that she is practically on the verge of having an anxiety attack.

Suzanne Guthrie, a writer on spirituality says, “I inherited anxiety biologically, so I have to watch its course – feeding on me and bubbling up in me and then offered by me – the bread of anxiety. (I must say to my credit, that many disasters have been averted by my detailed, all-consuming hard work of worry. If you worry hard enough, the disaster won’t happen. That’s what it feels like, anyway.)”

As we all know, this form of demanding hospitality has forever been expected of women, a gendered responsibility. But Jesus refused those kinds of socially determined roles. When he comes to visit, he not only receives but also offers hospitality. Here his hospitality extends to Mary, supporting her desire to sit at his feet and learn, in essence to be a student of Torah. Such a role was entirely reserved for men, and Mary was called into it. Seated at his feet, she gave her attention to Jesus.

As Lutheran Pastor Rob Myallis puts it, “Maybe in our culture of sound bites and tweets, active listening is one of the most powerful displays of mercy we can give someone – ‘to receive beneath the surface.’ – also a kind of diakonia. (to describe oneself as doing diakonia on behalf of Jesus is a very good thing. It is something, in fact, every Christian is called to in their baptism.) How often do we have people simply sit alongside of us, without any agenda but to focus on us? She listened.”

The point in all of this is that we are not called to choose between Martha and Mary. Both are offering hospitality, and when this is offered freely, without anxiety and distraction, it is the currency of the Kingdom of God. Both women were engaging in a mystical response to the presence of God – to truly experience the holy when it is present.

And there are different kinds of such attention. One may be a mystic in the pattern of Brother Lawrence who was not elevated to the role of an educated choir brother in his monastery, but found God in his day-to-day work among the pots and pans of the kitchen – hospitality for the whole community. One might also be a mystic in the manner of Julian of Norwich who heard the presence of God in her dreams and during illnesses, and listened with great care to what God spoke, reflecting on it deeply. She then brought the learning she received to the hospitable listening and counseling for the needs of others in her town.

Regardless, deep attention paid to God is a mysticism that takes us beyond this world's appearances into the depth of the eternal holy, where God receives our hospitality and returns hospitality to us yet again. This is not a state reserved for extra-special religious people, but for all who wish to not only talk to God, but also to listen more deeply to God's responses.

And nowadays, I can't help but wonder over an amazing display of an astonishing hospitality from the divine. We have all been experiencing the sight of incredible photos of the ultimate end of the universe transmitted from the James Webb Space Telescope.

This incredible instrument is able to look 13.6 billion light years distant—which will be the farthest we've ever seen into space. When viewing the youngest formations in this field, we

are being shown the universe as it existed within a mere billion years after the big bang. We see young stars being born, and older ones dying. Galaxies are seen in a totally new way. And don't ask me to explain how distance shows us time as never before. I know that the grandson of Howie Anderson gets all this this, but I don't understand him either.

I will grant you this it is a vast human accomplishment, to deliver such beauty with such delicate instrumentation, and so many years of work. But I would also insist that this is a form of incredible hospitality on the part of the creating God. We are received as guests within the cosmos of which we are a beloved part.

We have traveled from the work of Martha to receive guests with a meal; to Mary listening deeply to the teacher who receives her; to an amazing-fireworks display of God's power and beauty. In all this we should remember that we are the product of God's overflowing love, which brings each of us into being and holds us in the palm of her hand. This love is completed when we pour out our love in return, bathing in deep, holy goodness. So, I invite you to enter this mystical hospitality, given and received, to rejoice in the glory, great and small, of all creation.