

July 20/21, 2019
Year C, Proper 11 (Genesis 18:1-10a, Psalm 15, Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:38-42)
Liz Preysner

Eternal God who made Abraham, Sarah, Mary and Martha to be followers of your way of love and service, inspire us with the strength to dwell in your tabernacle and abide upon your holy hill. May we remain open to the movement of your Spirit guiding us to do what is right, love our neighbors, and speak truth from our hearts. Amen.

Once upon a time there were three bears who lived in a house in the forest. There was a great big father bear, a middle-sized mother bear, and a tiny baby bear. Also once upon a time and in the same forest, there was a little girl named Goldilocks who found the bear family's house, knocked on the door, and went inside when she realized the house was empty.

I think most of us know how the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears continues. Goldilocks proceeds to help herself to the bear's chairs, porridge, and beds. The items belonging to the father bear are too big and too hard and those of the mother bear are too soft and too cold. But the chair, porridge, and bed of the of the baby bear, now those are just right. (With the slight exception of the chair – Goldilocks does ends up breaking that.) By the end of the story (until the bears wake her up, that is) Goldilocks is sleeping peacefully in the bed of the little bear, since it was “just right.”

The story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears is about finding the right fit. Goldilocks must go through a process of trial and error with the bear's chairs, porridge, and beds until she finds the items that are most suited for her. In her efforts to find that which is “just right,”

Goldilocks must discern her own place – and in the process navigate a binary system of big versus small, hot versus cold, and hard versus soft. Goldilocks’ ultimate answer is not to be found in these divisions, however. Her answer is in finding that which fits her – the option that is “just right.”

Today’s Gospel story is also about finding the right fit – not a fit in regard to chairs, porridge, and beds – but a fit in serving Jesus. The story of Martha and Mary shows us two examples of serving Jesus, examples that differ in outlook and application. When we hear this story we may jump quickly to a binary interpretation of the text: Mary is good and correct in her actions because she is listening to Jesus and Martha is bad and incorrect because she is working hard and not dedicating all her attention to Jesus. Such an interpretation should challenge us to consider more fluid ways of understanding how to be followers of Jesus, but it is also an understandable one - as humans our brains want to break things down into categories so that we can place objects, people, and actions into classifications that help us understand the world. Sometimes such categories can be helpful, for, to return to the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, it is nice to know if food is too hot or too cold before attempting to eat it. And sometimes such categories are required, for following Jesus always requires us to choose the way of love and inclusion over the way of hate and exclusion.

The story of Mary and Martha offers us insight into how to discern our own discipleship - the ways we are a “fit” in being the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. We find Jesus today visiting the home of these two sisters, receiving their hospitality, and teaching them about his message of love and salvation. Martha is the more task-oriented of the two sisters, she is the one

who welcomes Jesus and sees to it that the household fulfills its responsibilities in regard to caring for its guests. Having Jesus visit probably wasn't easy - imagine what it would be like if he showed up at your home - and Martha's call to serve Jesus isn't something to dismiss as incorrect or misaligned. After all, hasn't Jesus already defined good discipleship in terms of service to others? A few weeks ago we heard about Jesus' commissioning and sending of seventy disciples. As he sends them, Jesus tells these disciples to expect hospitality and accept it when offered. Martha seems to be doing exactly what Jesus desires for his followers - she is welcoming him and graciously allowing him to share the shelter and sustenance of her dwelling place. And our reading from Genesis today also holds up hospitality as a key component of discipleship. Upon encountering God Abraham's first instinct is to offer hospitality - he calls for food and water to be brought to the three men who appear before him, for in welcoming and serving these divine visitors he is manifesting his faith. Martha's actions, therefore, fit in a long tradition of living into discipleship through service to others motivated by love of God.

It is Mary, however, who seems to receive praise in this Gospel story. We read that she sat at the Lord's feet and listened to him. Jesus himself declares that she has chosen the better part. How can this be, since in many other parts of the Bible service to others is an important aspect of following God? The answer, perhaps, lies in motivation and fit.

In Colossians Paul tells us that we are reconciled to Christ through Christ's sacrifice as long as we continue firm in our faith and without forgetting the hope of the Gospel. Perhaps, then, Jesus isn't critiquing Martha's actions so much as he is reminding her that no matter what we do it should be done rooted in faith and confident in the love of Jesus working in and through us. "Martha, Martha," Jesus says, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need

of only one thing.” Perhaps it is not Martha’s actions that Jesus critiques, rather it is Martha’s motivation. In her distraction she has lost sight of Jesus’s message of redemption, renewal, and rest for the weary. Without that knowledge undergirding her work, Martha becomes momentarily distracted and needs Jesus’ gentle redirection in order to re-establish the hope of Christ at the center of her very fitting and much-needed discipleship of service.

Mary, on the other hand, has remained firm in her motivation to keep Jesus and his teachings at the center of her discipleship. Yet this doesn’t mean her “fit” in serving Jesus is better than Martha’s. Rather, each woman is called to find the “fit” in following Jesus that is best for them. Each woman has separate talents, allowing them to serve the God they love in diverse ways. The story of Martha and Mary, then, isn’t an “either/or” but rather a “both/and.” It is a story that is not about rigid binary divisions in regard to discipleship, rather it is a story to help us understand our talents as unique, divinely-given, and integral gifts we have to offer in service of the God we proclaim lives and moves among us.

Christ’s invitation to all of us this day, and throughout our whole lives, is for us to discern how to stay focused on the hope of the Gospel and best serve him as disciples - not in a manner that is too big or too hard or too small or too easy, but rather in the manner that fits us, the manner that is “just right.”