

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, July 17, 2022

The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Genesis 18:1-10a; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

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For the King

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I think it was last November, about two or three weeks after arriving here at Saint Thomas
That I met one of our extraordinary florists, whose work you can see throughout the year,
Beautifying the altar, the chapel, the shrine.

And I said: “Thank you, so much, for your work, your artistry.

It’s really beautiful.”

And what he said in response was so incredibly wonderful. He said:

“Thank you. I appreciate it. And. It’s not for you.”

At the time, I must have given him a strange maybe startled look; because he followed it with:

“I appreciate what you said. But you should know. When I make these arrangements.

I know I’m making them for the King. What I do, I do for him.

I’m glad other people enjoy them. But I make them for the King.”

I was—am—so profoundly moved by his faithfulness,

By his consciousness that his work is a form of prayer and worship.

And it led me to reflect more intently on the beauty of this place,

The real beauty of this magnificent church:

It’s not that it’s beautifully designed, marvelously carved, adorned and decorated;

It’s not that the paraments and vestments are wonderfully woven;

It’s not that the music offered is glorious and gloriously sung, played, conducted;

It’s not that the service is so well-ordered and executed:

However aesthetically rich, multifaceted, superlatively and overwhelming splendid

This place is...

Its real beauty is that it is all prayer. Intentionally, self-consciously. Prayer.

Prayer in stone, song, color, glass, fabric, wood, metals,

Even flesh and blood and bone: our own.

It is a deep river of prayer we’re invited not merely to soak up

But into which we’re invited to dive,

To take our part, to make our own, to let it flow in and through us.

It’s prayer meant to be lived and experienced in community;

Meant to come alive in human lives,

To become a conduit of a tremendous and transformative grace

Meant to pitch us outside of ourselves

And toward the love and service of others,

By grounding all we are,
In the love and service of God.

It is no wonder, then, that in our readings from Genesis and our Gospel today
The image we're given of prayer alive in a human life
Is that of hospitality, of welcome, service.
And it's this little story of Mary and Martha especially
That helps us understand what a life of service that flows from prayer can look like
As well as well what a life disconnected from prayer can become.
And the brilliance of the story, its pastoral genius
Is that these two kinds of living
Are presented to us in the context of one person's life: that of Martha.
The story is not a study in contrasts, however often it's been read that way:
As if the active and contemplative lives that Martha and Mary so often figure
Are being pitted against each other, with our Lord choosing the victor.
No. There's no competition here. It's an invitation to wholeness,
That, in fact, invites us to understand how easily service divorced from prayer
Can become little more than distraction,
And how service rooted in prayer is itself a fruit of prayer.

It's easy to miss this at the beginning of the reading,
But our old friend St Ephrem the Syrian is quick to point it out:
"Martha's love was more fervent than Mary's, for before he had arrived [at her home],
She was ready to serve him." (Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron)
What a fantastic insight!
Martha lovingly welcomes Jesus as her guest, delights to show him hospitality.
And Jesus, who is himself the Welcome of God
Delights to receive Martha's welcome, just as he delights to welcome Mary's devotion.
Now, chances are, Jesus wasn't the only guest.
Other disciples probably accompanied him
And there were probably other members of the household as well.
There were a lot of people to attend to.
Mary would likely have been expected to be with her sister.
But she's not.
As Martha's preparing food and refreshment for the community,
Mary's receiving spiritual nourishment and refreshment from our Lord,
Mary's listening to our Lord
Mary's being shaped by the loving regard of our Lord
Which is to say: Mary's engaged in a profound act of prayer.
And then something turns in Martha. Something makes a shift.
The work she began in love, rooted in her devotion
Rooted in her own prayer,
Rooted in her own response, no doubt, to herself hearing our Lord's teaching
And discovering herself transformed by his loving regard,
The work, in other words, that was the fruit of her prayer and a form of it,
Becomes burdensome to her. Becomes a chore.
Is cut off from its root.
And envy is the knife that does the cutting.
"Lord," she says, "dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone?
Bid her therefore that she help me."
"Aren't you offended, Lord,
That I've become miserable and my sister has no share in that misery?"

Tell her she has to be miserable too!"

And you can hear the tenderness in Jesus' voice as he replies,
"Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:
But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part,
which shall not be taken away from her."

Notice what he doesn't say:
He doesn't put down, denigrate, or dismiss her service, her ministry.
He clearly appreciates and values what she's been doing.
What he gently reproves is her anxiety, borne out of envy, that's evacuated her ministry
Of any real meaning, which is to say,
And real joy or goodness or love, or even the possibility of real rest,
And has just made of it a tool Martha can use
To show how neglectful and terrible her sister is
And how longsuffering, dutiful and all-around better she herself is.
When our text says that Martha was "cumbered about much serving"
The Greek word here (sometimes translated "distracted")
Means to be dragged about. Compelled.
Something else that's in her that is not truly her, is running her
And it's envy: it's the power that pits one against another
The power of competition, of strife, of violence
The power of sin and the power death.
It is precisely the thing that Christ came among us to undo once and for all,
And here he gently undoes it in Martha by insisting:
There needn't be competition here.
Jesus doesn't suggest that the better part cannot be found in acts of service:
The one needful thing isn't to abandon good works or serving others
For a kind of contemplative existence that eschews or obviates service,
Such a thing would be either meaningless and diabolical.
The one needful thing is to be focused on the One from whom all good comes
To sit at his feet,
To be shaped, formed, by his loving regard,
Into an instrument and channel of that goodness
To a world sorely in need of it.
Many things appear necessary in this broken world:
Money, fame, power, doing the most, being the best, getting ahead,
But in choosing the one needful thing: the fullness of God's love in Christ,
In receiving the grace to be rooted there in that fullness
So that all our doing is a blossoming in us, with us, through us, of that fullness,
We discover that the better part:
Goodness beyond knowing,
Love that is unbounded,
Joy that is full,
Peace that passes understanding,
All that becomes ours, and will not be taken away from us.
And all of that will empower us to do
All those good works that God has prepared for us to walk in.
Indeed, without that rootedness in the fullness of God's love in Christ, without that center,
We cannot actually do very much of anything that's worth very much of anything at all.
All our righteous doing,
Severed from a rootedness in the righteousness of God received and nurtured through prayer,
Has a way of becoming self-congratulatory self-righteousness.
All our service,

Severed from a rootedness in the joy of Christ received and nurtured through prayer,
Has a way of becoming, at best, a cherished hobby,
At worst, a toilsome, resented burden, an endlessly exhausting project.
All our good deeds,
Severed from a rootedness in the love of Christ received and nurtured through prayer
Have a way of becoming just so many things we can do to each other.
All our works,
Severed from a rootedness in the peace of Christ, received and nurtured through prayer
Have a way of becoming furtive distractions or selfish indulgences.
Without abiding in the love of God as our center,
All we can think to do with suffering is get rid of it,
But never compassionate it, find meaning in it, or redeem it
And we quickly descend into a kind of anxious, empty Pelagian hedonism,
In which we're restive and restless and lost.
But if we have the center, if we are centered in the one thing necessary,
If the still point of the turning world is our source and center
If through faith, by grace, in prayer,
We're grounded in, focused on the One who loved us before we could love him
And who yearns to fill us with his love
If we're grounded in the One who made peace through the blood of his cross
Undoing our envy and rivalry
And who has himself become our peace, our reconciliation,
Our righteousness, our resurrection and our life
If we're grounded in the One who is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine...
Then what good work would we refuse to accomplish
By, in and with the grace of this One working in us?
What act of service that was meet and right for us to do would go undone?
Our service and our prayer must be oned in our lives.
Our service must be rooted in prayer if it is to become our prayer and bear the fruit of prayer,
if it is to truly move us outside ourselves to compassionate the world,
And be a source of rest, refreshment, joy, for us and for all around us.

Beloved, how often is our service divorced from our prayer?
How often are we cumbered, anxious, tossed about, daunted, discouraged, exhausted
By the vicissitudes of this parlous world,
And all the more then given to envy of one sort or another,
Which only serves to confirm us in the bondage to sin from which, try as we may,
We cannot free ourselves.
Our Lord bids us, invites us, as he invited Martha, to choose the better part.
If we would serve, let us, through prayer receive the grace to serve.
If we would be hospitable, let us receive and be transformed by our Lord's own hospitality,
Let us enter the stream of prayer,
The stream that flows so powerfully through this place from Jesus' own gracious heart,
Let us be washed, forgiven, renewed, clothed with Christ's own goodness, light and life,
Fed by Christ with Christ at Christ's own table,
Let us receive the strength and power to love, welcome, and serve Christ in our neighbor.
Let us allow this prayer, our prayer, the Church's prayer, Christ's own prayer
To live in us and become our lives,
That all we do, whatever we do, we may do it for the King...

...even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be all honor, power, and glory with the Father in the Unity of the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.