

Pentecost 6, 2025; Luke 10:38–42
Christ Church, Sparta, NC
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In all my years of being a professor in Ivy Towers, I've met lots of people who are the "important" people in our world. Documentary film makers, novelists, TV commentators, preachers, an actor or two (Natalie Portman used to work out at the same gym where I played very badly on an intramural basketball team—we were both much younger then). But there was only one man I've met—someone you might recognize from the news—especially if you've followed US economic policy from the 1990's onward—who I wanted to sick Jesus on...and he was the president of my university.

When I met him, it was the first Thursday in October 2001 at 5 minutes until 6 pm in the evening. I know this because he held office hours for students from 5-6 on the first Thursdays, and if you didn't literally make it into his office by 6pm, he sent you away until next month. We were the last people plucked from the line outside his assistant's door. I was with two of my fellow student government leaders. We were concerned about the search for a new Dean at our school. We had come to advocate for student voices to be included in the search. As we walked into his mahogany-walled office, he sat on a couch across from another couch—where we were told we could sit. He looked up at us, sighed, looked at his watch, took off his shoes, sat back with his arms draped across the back of the couch, put

his feet up on the table between his couch and ours, and said, “You’ve got five minutes: Go!”

He made it clear to us that we were keeping him from his martini or dinner or nap or whatever he would rather be doing at 6pm sharp.

We hit our talking points. We made our pitch. And we were dismissed at 6:59 and 55 seconds (or so it seemed). We had known from the beginning of the encounter that our cause was not going to be well-received or even, frankly, heard. At 6:59 and 56 seconds, one of the mahogany panels in the room opened and a young woman enthusiastically waved us over—we were ushered into the backrooms of the office building and greeted by several others who said, “we heard your pitch—and we want you to tell us more.” We sat with them for an hour and discussed much more than we had planned. Honestly, I don’t even remember if we managed to change anything with that search—but the work we did together felt different than our encounter, literally sitting at the feet of the “very important man.”

This encounter in my younger years (now, more than 25 years ago!) somehow always flashes across my memory whenever I read these texts appointed for the sixth Sunday of Pentecost in Year C of the lectionary cycle—which usually is the middle of the summer. And it’s the tension between my experience of sitting

at the famous man's feet, and my own sense of what it means to be Jesus's student and a member of Jesus's movement—it's the tension in these scenes that grabs me each time I read them.

Both our First Reading and the Gospel are familiar stories. Abram and Sarai host three strangers who announce that God's promise of a child will *finally* be fulfilled—even if they're both, well, really old for such things. In fact, in the verses just after the ones we read, Sarah laughs—the laugh of one who has been disappointed so many times that such ridiculousness isn't even worth taking seriously. And while the hospitality she and Abram show toward the strangers who are traveling is extravagant, Sarai and Abram, aren't really up for taking reproductive advice from any of them. The snacks may have been top notch, but their listening skills weren't exactly honed toward these strangers.

Then we have the familiar story of the time when Jesus came to visit Mary and Martha and Mary sat at Jesus's feet, listening to his tales of adventure and his vision for how the reign of God might come to be. I imagine Jesus's feet were dusty, well-calloused, and maybe a little stinky (much like feet that have been in wing-tipped shoes all day). But to see Mary sitting at Jesus's feet draws out a different image for me. Sitting at someone's feet is a position that implies a

relationship of teacher and student in the ancient world, and even today. And this morning's gospel story even more vividly reminds us of whose feet we sit at. Jesus, our teacher, is ready with a lesson for us. Teach us, Jesus, teach us.

But the scene in the Gospel story doesn't begin with Mary sitting at Jesus's feet. It begins with *Martha*—Martha, Mary's sister, welcoming Jesus into her home and then beginning to prepare a meal for him...after all, he had been traveling and needed nourishment.

But neither Mary, Martha's sister, nor Jesus, follow her into the kitchen. Instead of helping with preparations, they sit—Mary sits at Jesus's feet as a disciple, a student. Jesus seems to relish the opportunity to share his wisdom, his stories, his advice. Sitting at his feet, Mary is one of the disciples, one of Jesus' students, one who will no doubt tell others all that she has learned. Certainly, the gospel writer sees Mary as the exemplary student. The one Jesus will tell his other students about. The one he would compare her sister to—instead of vice versa.

And in many ways, we celebrate Mary's studiousness. Women do not always have the opportunity for such luxuries—there are always many more things needing doing and studying at Jesus's feet isn't one of those things that feeds hungry people, or mediates disputes among neighbors, or cares for family

members, or manages workers, or milks the goats. Devotion to Jesus—studying with Jesus—isn't something that women—in Martha's world and often in our own world—get to do.

And so, for good reason, Martha seems cranky about Mary's complacency toward preparation—toward hospitality. She even asks Jesus, their *guest*, why he seems to ignore how unfair it is that Mary neglects her share of hospitable work. And, if I'm being honest here, Jesus makes me a little mad with his patronizing pat on Martha's head, telling her that she is distracted with many things. Luke's Jesus seems to imply that Martha is unable to let go of the everyday for a glimpse of the extraordinary.

Yet Martha's incredulity at Mary's behavior often gets a lot of bad press, even at the hands of Luke. And Jesus's praise of Mary feels a little self-serving. After all, Martha simply wanted to provide a gracious meal for Jesus—and still get to hear his wisdom. Is that not what her ancestors Abraham and Sarah had done? Is that not what Jesus had taught them was part of the way of Jesus's followers—we are not just talking or listening heads—our hands, our feet, our hearts tend all of God's beloved ones because they are God's own image.

So Martha, actually, NEEDS to ask her question this morning, not out of distraction—but because of the tension she feels in the midst of her encounter with Jesus, the very-important-man. “Jesus, don’t you care that Mary has left all the work to me?” When I hear this question, I hear it as a call to action—as a call to advocacy for herself and for those who do the work of care, the work of hospitality, the work of keeping Jesus’s ministry fed and watered and clothed and loved.

You see, it isn’t that she doesn’t want to be sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to what he was saying. Martha is a pragmatist. Practical, sensible, generous in her hospitality, but efficient in carrying it out. There is no question for Martha about the value of listening to Jesus’ teaching, there is only the question of when that time should be.

And for me, that raises questions for my own relationship with Jesus the teacher. What is the right way to learn from Jesus? To learn the ways that God’s love and care and presence are infused in our daily lives? Should practical matters be shoved to the side so that there are no distractions? What work of daily living must be done in order to take the time to sit at Jesus’ feet? What work must we do, before we can come to this place, at Jesus’ feet? Martha’s question is very real for us today. What work must we do, O Christ, before we can sit at your feet?

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus answer to Martha and to us is, NOTHING. Nothing, there is nothing we need to do to sit at those feet. “Martha, Martha” Jesus gently chides, “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.” With his answer, Jesus invites Martha and invites us to sit down at his feet, to come to him regardless of the work we have done or the work we have to do. Come, sit at Jesus’ feet. To rest at the table, to breathe in our prayers, to sit with scripture, to refresh with the waters of our baptism.

But we must know that when we come to sit in this place, Christ teaches and nourishes us...but then sends us back to our work. And here’s where I wish Luke had told us just a little more about the story. Because, the Jesus I’ve come to know in my own life—the Jesus who draws me in ever more, is not that Jesus at whose feet I sit—is not the important man with his shoes off and need to rest at the end of the day. The Jesus I know asks us to rest, but then gets up from his own seat, puts on an apron, stands over the stove—spoon in hand—and teaches us as we chop the onions and he stirs the soup. Then teaches us even more when we sit down together with all who are hungry, including Jesus.

You see, when we see what Mary knew was that Jesus' teaching forever changes us if we sit and absorb us. What Martha knew was that Jesus's teaching changes our doings, changes our workings and our welcomings. And what Jesus *does* in our world is become present in the everyday places of our lives. Where we do not need to sit at the feet of the great man, but rather to follow the beacon of the woman behind the door—to follow her into the kitchen where the vision of God's reign gets mixed in with the practical work of living out the Gospel.