

Proper 11 C 2022
Luke 10: 38-42

Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words. I have a friend, a former Franciscan who is now an Episcopal priest, who likes to quote these words of Francis of Assisi because they speak to what our calling is as Christians, to determine the right time for words and actions, all the time being mindful of their effect on the people around us. I have been especially aware of them the past couple of weeks, during our camp. My office is just below the main hall where a lot of the larger events are held, the same hall where we feed a hundred people on a Sunday evening. Some mornings it sounds like between a cross between a plane taking off and a filming of a wildlife special but it is a holy racket, dozens of small feet racing across the floor above my head and I have to remember that these are the same kids who are learning to sit quietly for Bible study just down the hall from my office. These kids know the difference between time to exercise, to talk, to make friends and time to listen; I know a few adults, myself included, who could learn a lesson or two from them.

They make it look so easy. I believe we think of this issue of doing and being as so difficult, like the story of the visit of Jesus to Mary and Martha, because we tend to look at it in a very binary way. The details of the story are simple enough; a woman named Martha invites Jesus into her home in Bethany, where her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet while Martha does all the preparation for her guest. Finally, in exasperation, Mary asks her teacher if he does not care that she has been left with all the tasks and even has the gall to tell Jesus to tell Mary to help, earning Martha a rebuke that Mary has chosen "the better part," which will not be taken from her. This episode has been used to justify a subservient role for women in the church, other times for maintaining that the contemplative life is superior to one built on active ministry, even for dividing the people we know into "Marys" and "Marthas". In fact, the details are so compact that we can make it fit any agenda, violate its simplicity by inserting an allegorical spin on something that is about the rhythm of each of our lives.

Preach the gospel at all times. The problem enters the story when we talk about distractions, the kind that keep Martha from attending to what Jesus is saying. We know what it feels like not to be appreciated. We know what it is like to do the good that gives the church a good name. The problem comes when these activities take on a life of their own and allow us to forget why we are doing them in the first place. It is our distraction which keeps us from orienting ourselves to our primary purpose, which should always be the cultivation of the kingdom, our witness to the glory of God, whether our lives are full of activity or we simply have the gift of resting in another's words.

I have been reminded recently of the ways our work for the church can prove a distraction to finding Jesus in what we are doing. When I was new here, I made it a point to visit my colleagues; I have been talking a lot about the work we do with the marginalized and particularly Camp Faith, which has provided many opportunities for kids around the city who would not otherwise have them. As often as not, talking to these wise souls who have known the ministry here for years, I have felt I was making a sales pitch for the ministries of St. Paul's. Recently, as I was going on with my own agenda, my colleague, smiling at me all the time, interrupted me and said, "But you also have an altar, right? That's what we have admired about St. Paul's these years: your faithful worship in the midst of difficult circumstances". And he was right. What has kept the mission of this church secure all these years is being able to discern the voice of God through all kinds of change, a neighborhood in transformation, discernment of God's plan for this worshiping community during enormous transition. It has been the product of a lot of prayer, of sitting at the feet of Jesus even when it is very hard to keep still. But it is only out of that stillness that we begin to find out who and what we are in God's plan for us.

Mary, of course, has nothing to say during the visit of Jesus, either to him or her sister. I have appreciated the honesty of her silence, the trust in the steadfast love of God she shows, as the psalmist reminds us. Although we do a lot of singing in this place, our fundamental attitude during our worship is one of silence, because we cannot hope to hear the voice of God in our noise and distractions. If our life with God is an extended conversation, we need to be able to hear, which is a habit to be cultivated. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote about the importance of silence to the early Christian communities, how silence echoed a kind of humility before God that we had to honor. "Our freedom to be silent...reflects our freedom from resentment and the struggle for power. That is why authentic silence is so difficult. The freedom to be silent in this way indicates an affirmation, the great Yes to life in freedom from anger, power struggle and resentment," he says. It also reflects a humility before God that we need in order to hear God's voice about our role in the world when we leave this place.

If necessary, use words. It is freedom that we all want, after all, freedom to be the people, the community that God wants us to be. The words we have just heard have Mary assuming the better part, but the real gospel says that she has chosen the good part, the part which allows us to choose the moment of our own action, freed from our distractions. That is why this visit is paired with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The silence allows us a vulnerability, a choice of when to act, which is when we can be our own best selves. The story does not give us an either/or but a both/and in which to form our lives, to give ourselves space and silence before we act in the world.

The kids who continue to teach me at the camp remind me of this because they are still being formed. They are not often silent but when they are, it is genuine; it is earned and I am grateful for it, just as I am when they need to blow off steam. Most of them have no stake in being the loudest one in the room and they reinforce this habit by helping each other to be silent. They understand, in a way few adults do, that there is a time for words and for their absence, in our silence here and in well-chosen, holy words we offer outside these walls.