

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11
Luke 10:38-42

Earlier this year, an article entitled "How to Be a Good Wife" was making the rounds of email. The article was purportedly from a mid-1950's magazine called *Housekeeping Monthly*, and it contained such advice as:

- Have dinner ready. Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal ready on time for his return. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they get home and the prospect of a good meal is part of the warm welcome needed.

OK, I thought when I read it, on a well-organized, high-energy, nothing-else-has-gotten-in-the-way day, I could let him know that I've been thinking about him this way...But the more I read, the more I understood that no one who had sent this email meant for me or anyone else to take it seriously. The article advised women that their husbands were the masters of the house and that good wives always knew their place. Among baby-boomer women approximately age 60 and below, these instructions sound quaint and perhaps even unhealthy (for women, at least), and they gave us a good laugh. But for at least some women who are bit older, I imagine these instructions sounded just like what they were taught growing up. The instructions had evolved over time because they

enhanced the lives of everyone involved and, for a time at least, they were a way to make life go smoothly. Women of the 1950's who followed these instructions were doing what religion and society expected of them and were applauded for doing so. Undoubtedly, it made some women very happy. But somewhere along the way, at least for some people, what had been enhancing became enslaving.

How do we recognize when what used to enhance our lives enslaves us?

Last week, we heard Luke's version of the Good Samaritan. At the beginning of that gospel story, Jesus affirms that those who inherit eternal life are those who "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Lk 10:26-27) With the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus illustrates that *doing* what is required to earn eternal life is just as important as knowing what is required – and that what it takes to *do* God's work can change even when the words to describe it don't change at all. The Levite priest who refused to help the beaten man in the ditch almost surely knew about loving his neighbor and his God because those commandments originally came from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. But the religious and social constraints that kept him from helping the beaten man had always enhanced his life, keeping him ritually clean and safe. And he was so focused on those rules that had always enhanced his life that he could not be open to the Holy Spirit when it was leading him to a broader and deeper

understanding of what it means to love one's neighbor. The Good Samaritan, however, got it. He tended the beaten man's wounds, took him to an inn, paid for his time to recuperate, and promised that he would return to care for him further. He did what it took to fulfill the commandment to love his neighbor, and we remember him as the more faithful person because of it.

Martha, busy as she is with her many tasks, also seems to be doing what it takes to love her neighbor. After all, here is this renegade Jesus making his way to Jerusalem, followed by crowds who range from abusive to adoring, and Martha welcomes him into her home without hesitation. But Martha's story illustrates that doing things the ways that they have always been done can be a trap, too. She is so busy with what she is doing that she can't recognize the wonder that is in her midst, and thus she cannot fully love the Lord. Make no mistake about it, Martha was the epitome of what it meant to be a good hostess, and hospitality was a value beyond compare. Mary, on the other hand, was behaving scandalously, sitting at Jesus' feet just as any male disciple would do, and not accepting her role of providing hospitality by doing things for her guest. No wonder Martha complains as if she knew it was a foregone conclusion that Jesus would agree with her: after all, that's the way things were done. Imagine her chagrin when he rebukes her. I'm always a little surprised that she keeps on following him! But through the power of Jesus himself and the Holy Spirit, Martha must have finally realized what her sister Mary already knew: this man

was the Son of God, and not giving him her whole attention would have meant missing the presence of the Lord himself, would have meant not obeying the commandment to love the Lord her God with all her heart, soul, and mind. It's not that the old rules were wrong; it's just that we can't forget that the rules are there to enhance our lives rather than to enslave them. If Martha was so busy serving up hospitality – so “worried and distracted by many things,” as Luke tells us – that she couldn't listen to Jesus, then she had missed the point of the rules to begin with.

Many esteemed people who comment on this encounter among Martha, Mary, and Jesus hedge their bets and say that we should be like Martha *and* Mary: busy serving Jesus by doing, busy serving Jesus by listening. If you can't figure out what you're supposed to do, just do everything! But I think what Luke is showing us here is that the old rules don't hold just because they're old. Something new has happened: Jesus is among us, and the presence of Jesus among us invites us to see the world in a new way everyday. That doesn't mean that we can't rely on what we've always known to be true. On the other hand, it does ask us to consider that, despite all our best intentions, maybe what we've always known to be true wasn't quite like we knew it. For example, in Mary's case, loving God meant sitting at Jesus' feet like a male disciple would have done even though the day before it meant helping her sister in the kitchen.

Like most everything that Jesus tells us, this can be scary stuff for those of us who value our well-ordered lives. Why can't we just memorize the Great Commandment and the second like unto it and live our lives accordingly? Let's throw in the Ten Commandments, too. We know what those are, and, by golly, we live by them. Well, we can...and we should...as long as we remember that it is into our homes and our lives that Jesus comes daily and invites us to open our hearts and our minds. Like the Levite priest and Martha and even the 1950's housewife with more limited options, we find ourselves enslaved by what used to enhance our lives when we focus on how we've always known things to be instead of being open to the presence of the Holy Spirit, which makes all things new. Look at the Good Samaritan and Mary.

What a difference it makes when we open our hearts and minds to the presence of the holy within our midst. It happens every day to members of St. Stephen's, whether it's worshipping at the Celtic service, attending an AA meeting, taking communion to or just visiting someone who can no longer come to church, tutoring a child who lives in Fairfield Court, helping clean out a house untouched since Hurricane Katrina, providing medical care to people who would not otherwise receive it in the Dominican Republic, playing with HIV-infected children in South Africa, making food for Mayfair House, volunteering to answer phones in the front office or greet people on Sunday mornings – the list goes on and on. What is most amazing about all of those instances is the

treasure that we discover when we open our hearts and minds: we go looking for Christ within our own lives and we find him in the lives of others. When we open our hearts and minds, we see that Christ comes into our lives not so much by what we do, but through our openness to the world around us. The point is not so much that the Holy Spirit moves through us, but that by opening our lives to the Holy Spirit, we see the Holy Spirit at work in all the world. Martha thought that she was being faithful by what she did; Mary had a much fuller faith by being able to see who Jesus was.

Maybe a warning sign is when we think that we have no choice. Martha could not imagine that she had any other choice but to serve Jesus in the way that she had always known. The Levite believed that his religion gave him no choice but to ignore the beaten man in the ditch. But the presence of Christ in our lives gives us another choice: to do things the way that we've always done them, the way that we did them yesterday and the day before and the day before that, **or** to live our lives anew in the presence of Christ, where we are renewed and made new daily. A phrase from a book review that I read recently noted that "choice matters most of all," and that's what today's seemingly mild little gospel lesson drives home. If we do things the way that we've always done them, even if we've done them well, we keep ourselves from seeing the presence of Christ in our lives. If we open ourselves to the presence of Christ in our lives, we will be freed. The choice is ours.