

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Amos 8:1-12, Psalm 52, Luke 10:38-42
July 17, 2016
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While some people like to read “Forward Day by Day” every morning for spiritual inspiration, I read “Dear Abby” both for entertainment and for some holy wisdom. This past Thursday, sermon writing day, Abby responded to a woman who called herself “Confused in Florida.” Here is her dilemma:

“Dear Abby: I am a 22-year-old woman who enjoys achieving things in life. For example, I recently bought a house and paid for all the remodeling with my own money. I have been with my boyfriend for seven years (on and off). He was my first boyfriend, first kiss, etc. and because of that, I have always felt a deep connection with him. My problem is he doesn’t have goals for the future and just lives his life a day at a time. He’s comfortable with his low-income job and doesn’t plan on going to school.

He moved into my house six months ago, which makes our relationship that much more serious. Something I absolutely adore about him is his loving nature. He drops whatever he is doing to be there for me emotionally, and everyone who meets him tells me how lucky I am to have found such a great guy.

My question is, should I stay with my loving, caring boyfriend or is it time to find someone with the same goals I have?”

How would you answer Confused in Florida?

Abby responded, “Dear Confused: Ask yourself which is more important to you – a loving and emotionally supportive spouse or a hard worker who may be less so. Only you can decide the answer to that question.”

This newspaper feature resonated with me in light of the familiar story in Luke’s gospel about Mary and Martha. “Confused in Florida” sounds to me like a Martha. She is a hard worker and wants everyone around her to be one as well, especially her most significant other. I am a little surprised her boyfriend, who seems to be more of a Mary, has stuck with her all this time since she probably makes him feel inferior and insignificant, at least some of the time.

In our Bible story this morning, Martha is upset with her sister, Mary, who chooses to sit at Jesus’ feet rather than help with the meal preparation. Most women over 40 usually rather quickly come to Martha’s defense because they, too, have been raised to provide hospitality which includes house cleaning and meal preparation.

My mother, God bless her soul, was a Martha's Martha, so much so that she would rarely sit down during a meal. She was always running back and forth to the kitchen to get someone seconds. We would have to plead with her to please sit down, usually to no avail.

Doing for others is not the only form of hospitality or service that we can provide. People with the capacity to truly listen to another can sometimes give the greatest gift of all. Remembering what the Letter of James says, "...be quick to listen and slow to speak." (James 1:19) Being genuinely interested in what someone else has to say is to communicate without words the value of each life. We all want to think that our life is respected and appreciated. Oh, and by the way, God listens to us endlessly and, we assume, gladly.

I hope many of you read Bishop Hollerith's letter to us in regard to the rash of tragic deaths recently in Orlando, Baton Rouge, St. Paul and Dallas. He titled it **Pray! Listen! Speak!**

I was particularly challenged by what he said under the topic of listening. He wrote, "One of the most important activities we can engage in is that of listening to the feelings and experiences of others. We live in a society where people are generally far more interested in asserting their opinions than listening to what others have to say. Or, in the words of William James, 'A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.' As Christians we must demonstrate an alternative way of being in the world, one that values openness to the experiences of others and acknowledges that the truth is usually a multifold reality. In particular, deep listening involves paying close attention to the stories of those who differ from us, and a listening posture helps create an environment where healing and reconciliation are possible."

While we can all strive to be better listeners to one another, in our story from Luke, Mary is not listening to just anyone; she is listening to the one even Martha calls Lord. Can any of us adequately imitate Jesus, if we don't first listen to him? Jesus ever so tenderly rebukes Martha for being worried and distracted when he is right there in her house.

Someone named Sam Jones, probably not the former Boston Celtic great, wrote, "Christ always lives where there is room for him. If there is room in your heart for Christ, he will live there; if there is room in a law office for Christ, he lives there; if there is room on a locomotive engine, he will be there; if there is room in a baggage car, he will be there."

If we wake up to Jesus and go to bed with Jesus, we won't have to be worried or fearful during the hours in between. As someone has said, "Life is not so much a problem to be solved or fixed as much as a mystery to be explored and embraced." We can always walk through it or dance through it with a real presence in the person of God, the Holy Spirit.

If Jesus offers Martha a mild reprimand for not being focused on the most important part or aspect of life – his presence and teaching, the prophet Amos, 700 hundred years earlier, delivers a sledge hammer blow. “The end has come upon my people Israel...”

I am not big on doom and gloom, but every so often it may be instructive for us to hear from the fiery prophets of old. Here, Amos, speaking as God’s mouthpiece, is damning the people for their shady business transactions which line their pockets while putting the poor at an even greater disadvantage than they already are.

It is always good for us to remember that God wants all our dealings to be above board and fair. The poor are the last of God’s people we should ever treat unethically or less humanely.

I’ll end with this simple prayer by Rebecca Florence Miller. It comes from her contemplation on how to make America great again.

God, we cannot change everyone else, but we ask you to change us. Live your goodness through us. Break our hearts with the things that break your heart. Use us to bring life and peace to a broken world, instead of more hatred and anger. AMEN.