

As God Sees Us

When I was in University in Korea, I used to take a train for the first part of my trip to school every day. The train stopped at a large station, where many people would transfer to buses to take them to their different schools. The streets around the station were crowded with buses, and the station was crowded with students and commuters. Rush hours were always very busy; people rushed from the train as soon as the train arrived at the station. It was like racing; everyone was so fast and competitive, and I was one of the racers. One day, in the afternoon, not in a rush hour, there was no need to rush because not many people were there. But I saw people still racing and I found myself running as fast as them. I asked a friend of mine who was running with me, “Why are you running?” and he said, “I don’t know, just because *they* are running”. Everybody at the station was running. Hurrying, getting from here to there as fast as possible was so ingrained into their unconscious mind, they did not even consider the possibility of slowing down.

This experience reminds me that sometimes we don’t know why we are doing what we are doing. Sometimes we forget why we started what we are doing now. In today’s Bible reading, I wonder if Martha knows why she is doing what she is doing.

Martha welcomes Jesus and his disciples into her home. She begins to prepare a meal. Hospitality was very important in Jewish households; the women of the household were expected to prepare and serve refreshments and tend to their guests’ every need. Martha is doing her best for her visitors, but she becomes distracted, first by her many tasks, and second by the sight of her sister, Mary, who has chosen a different role. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, the teacher, the rabbi, and loses herself in his words. Women were not permitted to touch the Torah or be instructed in its words; Mary’s actions are a distinct break with Jewish custom. Yet, Jesus accepts it. He accepts her curiosity, her desire to learn.

It’s not recorded, but there may have been other women in the room – listening, not serving. Luke records that many women were regular followers of Jesus. In Luke 8:1-3, “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were

with him, as well as some women: Mary, called Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their sources.”

I think Jesus must have appreciated the presence of those women around him, whether they were in the kitchen or the living room. He must have been thankful to both Mary for her attentive listening, and to Martha for her provision of food, drink, and a place to stay. Those who were hosts to Jesus and his disciples must have felt so blessed, whether they worked in the kitchen or mingled with their guests.

So, it is sad to hear Martha say, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

Martha welcomed him, but her welcome did not last very long. She stopped enjoying, and started fussing, focusing on her duties alone. She forgot the reason why she invited Jesus into her house. Martha saw only the familiar challenges of hospitality; Mary saw that those challenges were, for once, better left aside. I have sympathy with Martha, not because I like serving food, nor because I like getting things done, but because I also sometimes lose focus like Martha does: the joy of working, the joy of serving others, even the joy of doing nothing and the joy of living my life. I’d like to learn how to live fully in every moment with joy and gratitude no matter where I am and no matter what I do.

Perhaps, that’s what Jesus hears in Martha’s words.

He says, “Martha, Martha, 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.”

What is the better part that Mary has chosen and Martha needed? He did not say that one job is better than the other. The only thing I could find in this story is that Martha has lost a sense of gratitude; Mary has chosen to be thankful at Jesus’ feet, and Martha has chosen to be resentful in the kitchen. The difference between Martha and Mary is not what they did, but how they did what they did – where their hearts were mattered more than what their hands were doing.

This story reminds us of a way to follow Jesus Christ; that is to celebrate God’s presence everywhere and all the time. In A New Creed of the United Church, we say that we are called to be the church to celebrate God’s presence. We believe

that God called us to be the Church; God gave us a new way of life, discipleship life, just as Jesus changed his disciples' calling from fishing on the sea of Galilee to fishing for people; from living for themselves to living *with* and *for* others in the presence of God.

So, to be a disciple is to celebrate God's presence. Can we celebrate God's presence in every circumstance, and in every event? Can we celebrate God's presence in our church, at our home, in our work and our ministry? Can we celebrate God's presence not only in those whom we love, but also in those with whom we do not agree? Can we celebrate God's presence in every creation?

Those are big challenges for us. They were big challenges for the disciples, too. But we know that the early Christian community started with the celebration of God's presence in their midst. We also know how *we* got together, and why we are here; we have felt God's presence, and we want to keep celebrating that presence in the midst of our life. Being grateful for God's presence is our most important ministry.

Actually, gratitude started with God. In Genesis God says seven times of creation, "it is good". God loves the world, and celebrates her presence in every creation. As we celebrate the presence of God, we realize where we came from, where we will return, and how much we are deeply rooted in God.

Last week, Mollie Stringer and I visited La Rosa Gardens to meet some of the residents there. I met with many people, but one woman in particular stands out. She had just celebrated her one hundredth birthday. After a good conversation, she said she wanted to show me something before I left. There were some flowers in the garden; two pink lilies and some white roses. She was impressed with the flowers: their colors, smell and beauty. And I was impressed by her: her way of showing reverence and gratitude even for small things. A few days later, I was watering trees and flowers in my own garden with new eyes and a thankful heart, remembering her expression of gratitude.

It is not what we have nor what we do, but how we see what we see that makes our life different and beautiful. May we see the beauty of God's creation with as much gratitude as God sees us.