

“Listen & Don’t Fret” by Michele Frome

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SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of Church of the Saviour



Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus and his disciples are traveling. They come to a village, and Martha welcomes them into her home. Martha’s sister, Mary, sits at Jesus’s feet, hanging on his every word. Martha, meanwhile, is preparing the meal for the guests. Now, Martha is good at fixing guest meals, but usually Mary helps her, and she starts resenting having to do it all herself. She turns to Jesus to recruit an ally.

“Jesus, doesn’t it seem unfair to you that I do all the work and my sister just sits here? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” Jesus replied, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better”.

I’ve heard this story of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary many times, and I must confess: I don’t like it; I’ve never liked it. I identify with Martha: doing all the tasks that need to be done, and then Jesus just dismisses her! It’s not fair – Martha deserves some credit, too!

But in preparing this sermon, I decided the main message of this

story isn't about what Martha is doing – it's about what Mary is doing. Yes, Jesus dismisses Martha's activity as unimportant, but that's the way Jesus usually teaches – he makes a stark, condemning statement about the status quo in order to get our attention. The story is really about the promise of more – the new way of life in the kingdom of God, represented by what Mary is doing.

OK, so what IS Mary doing? Well, she's listening. She's just sitting there, listening.

If you know me, you know that “just sitting there” is often hard for me. I'm a “doer.” When I'm watching a TV show, I usually want to do something productive during the commercials. I make numerous To Do lists, and I review the day by counting how many items I can check off the list.

Like Martha, I used to think that “listening” was easy – all you do is just sit there, it doesn't require any work.

Then, about a year and a half ago I embarked on a program of training called Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE – training to become a chaplain. (Thanks to Seekers for moral support & financial support from the Growing Edge Fund.) Ironically, one of the hardest things for me to learn in this training has been LISTENING. It's a lot more than just sitting there. This training forces me to examine myself, my thoughts and my motives while I'm listening. What I've learned is that much of the time I'm sitting there, I'm thinking about

- my own experience with the situation they're describing,
- what I think they should do about it,
- what I'm going to say next,
- whether I need to stop at the grocery store on my way home,
- my legs are hurting & I'd better need to shift my position soon –

You get the idea – I'm not listening.

The role of the chaplain, I've been taught, is not to solve someone's problems or even to make them feel better. It's to be present as a witness to their feelings, to what is real inside of them. – Sometimes, I'm able to do that. And sometimes, when I do that, my presence seems to cause something to shift inside them. And sometimes, being present & listening seems to cause something to shift inside me.

I want to tell you a short story from my work as a chaplain. There's a nursing home resident I visit frequently, we'll call her Terry. Terry is in her late 80s and her mind is 100% intact, but her body is giving out on her, and she's usually surrounded by people with a lot less mental capacity. She's always unhappy, always complaining. I've tried to help her get a more positive outlook, and failed miserably.

I asked my supervisor, the Rabbi, what to do. He suggested that I try just listening to her. So, I continue to visit her, she continues to complain, and I struggle to listen, without passing judgment or trying to fix anything.

One day while I'm visiting with Terry, a colleague walked by, and jokingly said to me: "OK, Michele, I see you there, goofing off instead of working." Terry immediately replied with a very firm voice, "she IS working." It was a real treat for me to find out that Terry felt I was working, doing my job, listening.

Back to our story of Mary, Martha and Jesus. Mary is LISTENING, listening to the voice of God in human form. Listening to God is important. The Hebrew scripture reading we heard this morning really underscores this for me. In this passage, God says,

“I’m sick and tired of the corruption of these people. I’m not forgiving them anymore. Instead, I’m going to punish them. Imagine the worst punishment you can think of – what’s going to happen to them will be even worse! I’m going to send a famine, but it’s not going to be a famine of food or water – it’s going to be a **famine of not hearing the words of the Holy One.**”

Can you imagine that – never hearing God’s word...never being able to know God’s guidance, or comfort, or prodding? Never knowing God’s call?

Think about it.

How does that make you feel?

It makes me feel trapped forever in my own doubts...stuck in uncertainty ... hopeless.

As many of you know, I practice the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon. Several decades ago, I made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God, the third Step. At least once a day, I re-make that decision. In order to carry out that decision, I try to work the eleventh step, which is to seek knowledge of God’s will for me and the power to carry it out through prayer and meditation.

If I couldn’t “hear the words of God,” I don’t know what I’d do. I’d be lost. So, listening is really important to me. But so is taking action, to carry out God’s will.

Returning to the story of Mary and Martha, I wonder: how come Jesus tells us to listen instead of taking action?

Wait a minute! That’s not what Jesus said. Jesus didn’t tell Martha to stop working; he told her to stop worrying! To quote another translation of this passage, Jesus said: “Martha, Martha! You’re anxious and upset –you’re fussing far too much

and getting yourself worked up over nothing.

So Jesus's message to Martha is: LISTEN and DON'T FRET. How does this speak to me today? To answer that question, I need to talk a bit about Celebration Circle, the mission group that plans our worship, and our new worship theme for the season.

The process Celebration Circle uses to come up with a theme for each liturgical season is really an interesting example of "listening as a group" – ...listening for the messages from God that best speak to us as a congregation in a specific period of time.

As usual, we started planning for this season a few weeks ago by asking ourselves: what will be happening in the world around us during this period, July 17- Sept 4?

Almost immediately, we all got really depressed – totally demoralized about all the bad things happening around the world, with no end in sight: random killings, terrorist violence, political candidates fueling fear and hatred, refugees with nowhere to go, more extreme weather disruptions... you know what I'm talking about. And looking at the scripture readings for the season, we felt like the doom and gloom predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures was aimed directly at the year 2016.

WHAT IN THE WORLD is going on??? , we asked. And WHAT IN THE WORLD are we going to do about it???

A bit like Martha in our Gospel story, I began thinking of all the things for me to do to try to fix the world – lobby for new legislation, campaign for better candidates, march in favor of gun control, joining an anti-violence group, post important quotes on Facebook, start a blog, and on and on. I felt exhausted just thinking about it. And I felt full of angst – even if all of you joined me, how could we possibly fix the world?

In response to what we all felt and heard, Celebration Circle

selected the Reflection passage that Ken read at the beginning of our service this morning.

This passage speaks to me in a particular way. Some of you have heard me talk about my Call to work in nursing homes. It's a Call that has been loud & clear for about a dozen years – no matter where I go, that's where I end up.

But I have some major doubts about this Call. Why? To put it bluntly, the people in nursing homes are not the voice of the future, they're the voice of the past. Nursing homes are not going to produce the leaders needed to address the problems facing the world today. If I'm going to help fix the world, I think to myself, shouldn't I be working with younger people, not older people?

But the first line of our Reflection says, "ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once," I hear Jesus telling Martha to stop worrying. And I hear Jesus telling me to stop worrying, also – it's not my job to fix the whole world.

In the next line, "ours is the task of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small thing I can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world will help immensely." I hear God saying it's OK – even my service in the nursing home is beneficial.

And then the last line: "It is not given to us to know which acts, or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good." In this, I hear God saying that I don't need to know how my small part is helping – it's not my job to know.

I'd like to share with you two other sections from this same essay by Dr. Estes, which also speaks to our theme of "What In the World":

"In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus

on that... We are needed, that is all we can know... Didn't you say you were a believer? Didn't you say you pledged to listen to a voice greater?"

"There will always be times ...when you feel discouraged. I too have felt despair many times in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it; I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate. The reason is this...there can be no despair when you remember why you came to Earth, who you serve, and who sent you here."

Don't despair. We are needed. God sent us here. Keep listening.

I'd like to close now with the words of the Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can,

And the wisdom to know the difference.

Amen.