

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Colossians 1:15-20
Luke 10:38-42

First United Church of Christ, Northfield
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July 22, 2007

Another Pentecost

Like most children, our daughters argued a good bit while they were growing up. All too often the argument was about who (or what) was best – cats or dogs, hamburgers or sloppy joes, Wonder Woman or Superman. I tired of this pretty quickly (perhaps because I am an only child!), and developed one of those “mom-isms” that the kids always remember: “Different people like different things.”

The mother of Mary and Martha does not appear in scripture, but I can’t help thinking that she might have said the same thing to her daughters. In the brief snippet of their lives we just heard from the gospel of Luke, they seem to go about things in very different ways – Martha getting busy with the dinner preparations and Mary sitting down to listen to their guest.

We see the same thing in the members of our church, of course. The Parish Life and Fellowship Committee (aka PLF) is full of Martha’s: people who get into the kitchen and get things done. Other groups and individuals do planning or teaching or gardening. Still others can be counted on to ponder about our activities and practices, to connect them with our theological beliefs and our history.

One of the important lessons I have learned as a minister is that all of these are entirely legitimate ways for people to live out their faiths. And it was not an easy lesson. Fresh out of seminary after three years of studying, I thought everyone ought to want to study. How could they resist, I thought, the opportunity to dig into scripture, do research on church polity, or update themselves on important social issues. But the community of Chewelah Washington was not organized around the life of the mind. Yes, there was a weekly Bible study, and they expected sermons to be theologically clear and compelling. But many – most – of them lived out their faith in quite different ways. They pattered around the church, raised money for the Good Neighbor Fund, provided space for nearly every organization in town, and one evening in November, fed beef stew and pie to the whole community, just as a gift.

Of course, the same thing is true in Northfield – and everywhere else. There are a wide variety of ways to practice our faith. You will remember St. Paul’s words to the young church in Corinth: “There are a variety of gifts ...” He admonished them not to value some of those gifts over others, nor to assume that all gifts should be the same.

I have been thinking this week about someone who found distinctive ways to express his faith – Professor Doug Adams who taught at Pacific School of Religion. Doug was a scholar of worship, and in his class we not only studied the history of Christian worship, we experienced it. Every class session we would move the chairs around, hear a different style of music, and generally immerse ourselves in some ancient catacomb or

church. That wasn't all: Doug also made a pastoral call on every student in his class, and brought what he learned about each one of us into class. When he visited our apartment, he got me talking about quilts; when the class was going to have an early American service, he invited me to bring them with me. As we spread them over my classmates' laps, he explained that early American churches often had no heat in the winter, and worshipers would bring bed covers to keep themselves warm.

What Doug is remembered for is his use of humor in worship and the life of the church. He encouraged all of us to read scripture with an eye for wit, sarcasm, and wordplay. And when the text didn't provide them, he added them. He was famous for his reading of the genealogy of Jesus from chapter one of Luke. As he read each name, he would hold up cue cards, telling the congregation to cheer, hiss, or say "huh" – this latter for names we can't identify anywhere else in scripture.

I tell you all this because Professor Adams died earlier this month, and when I think of how he influenced me as a student, it was by exemplifying the great variety of ways that people can worship, learn, and live their faiths.

In a related way, the passage we heard this morning from Colossians is also about variety. In this case, though, the variety comes in the set of descriptions for Christ: "Image of the invisible God," "firstborn of all creation," "head of the body," "firstborn from the dead", "first place in everything." One can almost sense the writer of this epistle searching around for as many distinctive phrases as possible so that everyone who heard the letter would find at least one image to relate to.

That intention – to communicate so that everyone listening will hear something they understand – ought to sound familiar. It is a reprise of the story of Pentecost, when the disciples suddenly found themselves able to speak all the languages of the world so that they could speak to every visitor and traveler in Jerusalem. The story of Martha and Mary is, I would argue, yet another reprise of the Pentecost story, this time focused on the language of action, rather than the language of language.

In our time, we recognize many "languages" that people speak in their lives – with the word "language" in quotation marks. Many of you will have taken a personality test called the "Myers-Briggs" that sorts people into 16 "types" with distinctive characteristics. The test is often used to help people recognize that different personalities look at the world in different ways – and that all of those ways are legitimate. The Enneagram is another way of describing personality differences, this time into 9 types.

In recent years, we have also come to appreciate that people learn in different ways: some do better by listening, some by reading, some by moving around and acting things out. And again, the underlying lesson is that just because someone thinks or feels different than you do, they aren't wrong in their thinking or feeling.

Perhaps it is because we have learned this lesson well that we are startled to hear what sounds like Jesus praising Mary for listening to him and chiding Martha for preparing the meal. This has been a difficult passage for all the Martha's in the world, who are quick to point out that without them, we wouldn't have meals over which to have conversations.

If you listened carefully, though, you probably noticed that Jesus did not chide Martha for doing the work; here's what he said: "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things...*" [Luke 10:41] The issue isn't cooking, it is fussing.

You don't have to be in the kitchen to fuss. More importantly, you don't have to be worried and distracted to be a Christian. Maybe you don't have to be worried and distracted at all.

That's a hard idea for most of us here. We are accustomed to worrying and multi-tasking. We pay attention to the world, and the world is a complicated and hazardous place. We pay attention to our households, and they are complicated and exhausting places. We try to pay attention to our own spirits, and they are complicated and broken places. And we try to pay attention to God, who seems too big and too demanding and too loving to quite understand. So we are worried and distracted.

Well, I do not know what style of discipleship God has called each of you to, but I am pretty sure it is not worry and distraction. I am pretty sure that whatever style of discipleship God has called you to may be challenging and difficult, but I am also convinced that it will be filled with joy, energy, and satisfaction. That's the promise of Pentecost: not only will God speak to you in a language you can understand; God will invite you to respond in the language only you can speak.

Prayer for July 22, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

Gracious God, you have led our church to take as its motto, "That they may all be one," and this morning we pray for the unity of Christians everywhere.

We begin by confessing that we are ambivalent about this commitment to unity. The beliefs and practices of some Christian groups seem foreign to us, and incompatible with what we hold dear. We are offended by claims of churches that believe theirs is the only way to know and serve God, and yet we are often tempted to make that same claim for ourselves. We are uneasy with vocabularies of discipleship and styles of worship of Christians from other cultures, including the other geographic and economic cultures of our own country. We fall into the habit of defining our own faith by saying who we are not, rather than who we are and whose we are.

Forgive us, God, for this ambivalence, and give us clearer vision of what we have in common with Christians from other traditions. Help us to see the gifts that our neighbors cultivate and offer to us, and to receive those gifts with gratitude.

Forgive us, too, for our arrogance in judging the faiths and practices of our brothers and sisters. Give us the humility to see our own faults and shortcomings more clearly, and to understand the lessons we might learn from other Christians. Open our minds and hearts to hear the good news from sources we do not expect.

At the same time, Holy One, we ask you to strengthen our ability to speak the truths of our faith and practice to the Christians around us. Make us more eloquent and elegant in proclaiming extravagant welcome, and more daring and articulate in acting with evangelical courage. Where we have been touched by your Holy Spirit, let us be fearless in sharing our experience. Where we have been called into service and action, let us be clearer in naming the source of our call.

In all things, help us to live those words that we write on our emblem: That they may all be one.

We ask this in the name of the one who calls the whole church into discipleship, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...

