

Luke 10:38-42

St. Barnabas

Have you ever heard the expression “life is so daily”? Sometimes it seems, as Yogi Berra said, life is “like déjà vu all over again.” At other, more serious times, we find ourselves just coping with the circumstances of our lives---from small daily annoyances to desperate difficulties. How is it possible to delight in the mundane, to recapture child-like innocence, to look at life with restored perspective? How might we consider our circumstances with something other than resigned familiarity?

The story of Mary and Martha is so familiar that it scarcely needs retelling, and that is precisely why it must be retold. Retelling an event is an exercise in what Lutheran theologian Krister Stendahl likes to call “redeeming the familiar” or seeing anew. To redeem reality is to take back our story and recast it in a different light. But for Christians there is an additional facet to life’s story. Hope. Hope is the moment redemption begins.

The context in which this morning’s story occurs is the key to understanding it. Scholars call this section of the gospel unique to Luke the Great Interpolation of acceptance and rejection. The first thing to note is that Jesus is setting out for Jerusalem to confront his destiny. Still closer to Galilee than Jerusalem, he is, none the less, in hostile territory. Seventy additional disciples have just been

appointed and sent out to preach the news that the kingdom of God has now come near. They return from their mission with joy, marveling, “Even the demons submit to us!” All these things, all that is said and done, carry with them a sense of urgency. Apart from that sense of urgency, without the awareness of cosmic change being brought about, this story of Mary and Martha would be sticky sweet with piety, a drawing-room drama of manners, rather than what it is: a story of priorities, of courses of action chosen by each player, and of visions realized.

There is Martha, who offers the shelter and sustenance of her home to Jesus. She senses the practical needs of the leaders of this movement and sets to work tirelessly to see that those needs are met. There is no question of obsessive behavior on her part: There is too much to do. She responds to what is urgent, the familiar realities. There are, as Jesus says, a few material things needed. But for all Martha’s commendable efforts on behalf of Jesus, her attention and interests are diverted from the primary spiritual value: hospitality to the stranger. An essential value in desert climates, hospitality to the stranger was literally the difference between life and death; and Old Testament patriarchs often found that they entertained angels unaware. With hospitality one pays attention to the guest, receiving the other as He wishes to be received. But so concerned is Martha to keep up the momentum of the moment that she fails to take into account the rationale for her tasks, the sole justification for the entire evangelical enterprise. It

isn't that what she is doing is unimportant; it is that she is, as the Gospel says, "distracted." Distracted, she has her priorities reversed. She has mistaken what is urgent for what is important.

Distraction is easy to demonstrate in our own lives. In the closing scenes of a popular movie, "The Four Seasons," a dentist drives his wife and two other couples off on a winter holiday in his new Mercedes. "A Mercedes isn't just a car," he says. "It's a thoroughbred." Then as his companions in the back seat of the car tear into a loaf of French bread, he screams, "Don't eat! One bread crumb and the resale value goes down \$5,000!"

After various mishaps on the ski slopes, a terrific argument ensues among the couples. Frustrated, the youngest of the women stalks out. By dawn when she has not returned, the dentist hikes out to "save" her. Catching sight of her on a hill, he starts out across a flat, snow-covered plain only to discover that he is actually walking on a flat, ice-covered lake. Through the ice he plunges; and it is now the young woman who rushes back to the rescue.

Here come all five of the dentists' companions to help: the young woman, her lover on crutches, the third man hobbling with a cane, his wife, and the dentist's wife all crammed into the precious Mercedes. Using ropes attached to the bumper of the Mercedes and at considerable risk to themselves, the five manage to save the dentist from the freezing water. He revives as they administer artificial

respiration on the shore. Sitting up, he sees to his horror his Mercedes sinking inexorably beneath the ice to the bottom of the lake. With anguished cries he screams, “My Mercedes, my Mercedes!” as the others sit, stunned. Then they OUT shout him, “We saved your life! Shut up you idiot, you’re alive! Is interspersed with “Who wants a rusty Mercedes!” as they stumble through the snow back to their cabin.

We, too, stumble over our priorities. At times we’re like the dentist with the Mercedes; at other times, like his friends who were so grateful to have him alive. But often setting priorities isn’t that clear-cut. Look at Martha: She was doing what she thought she “ought” to do, confusing social mores or standards with ethics. Standards and ethics are not the same thing, and we would do well to redeem that familiar confusion.

Presbyterian minister and former editor of “The Christian Century,” James Wall, once noted, “Standards are guidelines set by an industry or institution to satisfy public expectations or demands...” like pull dates on cereal boxes. “Ethics are derived from an inner moral compass which determines whether one will or will not do certain things to accomplish a goal. There is no ethics involved in the standards set by cereal companies about notifying customers as to when their products may go bad. There is no ethics involved in Congress’s standards for judging its members. In each case, an institution is responding not to the directives

of a moral compass but to outside pressure which says, in effect: there are laws that prevent you from poisoning the public or stealing from taxpayers, but we want to set up additional standards that will help you avoid the appearance of evil.”

Avoiding the appearance of evil is not the same as Christian living. Choosing the good, as Mary did in this morning’s Gospel, has a moral dimension more clearly indicated in the original Greek of this passage in Luke than in its English translation. That is, Mary has chosen on the basis of love. Martha was confusing the signs of enterprise, her society’s standards, with attention to their ultimate purpose. She mistook what was urgent for what was important. For a moment she did not recognize the new reality to which all her efforts were directed.

Those who attend to one last detail, leave their affairs in order, tie up loose ends, and engage in all the necessary and responsible tasks without which the old world would cease to turn are often not ready for the new. Distracted, we forget that all these efforts are only signs pointing away from themselves to the new reality which is to come. We cannot see beyond the immediate obligation to the transcendent reality of grace. Like Martha, we are too busy to dream.

In this morning’s Old Testament lesson, the prophet Amos used poetry to redeem the familiar. You remember: let justice well up like water and righteousness like a steady stream, for a famine of hearing the words of the Lord

has struck the land. He confronted the people of Israel with their lack of moral understanding. They were not just substituting the urgent for the important. They were indulging their every whim and, as a result, blinding themselves to what they were actually starving for. They had become so self-indulgent that they had lost the capacity to see beyond the fabric of daily existence. They had lost the capacity to dream.

Like the Israelites Martha found herself rebuked and redirected. You and I run toward an unseen goal and find the prize falls into our hands. Ask yourself, “For what do I dream, for myself, for my loved ones, for my community, for my country? With God the fabric of existence is stretched, and visions become reality.

Redeeming the familiar requires two things of us: First, that we choose to follow an inner moral compass without spinning on the breeze of external demands, remembering that God does not require us to be successful. All He asks is that we be faithful. And second, redeeming the familiar requires that we be ready for the new reality which will come from God, casting all our visions in new light.

Being faithful and, at the same time, ready for the new is something like playing left field on a baseball team. In *Shoeless Joe*, the book on which the movie “Field of Dreams” is based, Kinsella instructs his daughter in the finer points of baseball. “Just watch the left fielder,” he says. “He’ll tell you all you ever need to

know about a baseball game. Watch his feet as the pitcher accepts the sign and gets ready to pitch. A left fielder knows what pitch is coming, and he can tell from the angle of the bat where the ball is going to be hit, and, if he's good, how hard."

Kinsella's advice is not about luck or even skill. No, his teaching is a description of readiness for grace. If we're faithful, you and I will run toward the spot where the ball will be before it's there because we expect, anticipate, hope that new reality into being. If we're faithful, we'll strive for the vision before we see its end and be ready when the prize falls into our hands. If we're ready for the new, we'll rely on God's promises to fulfill the vision, believing He is trustworthy. If we're ready for the new, we will see that promise fulfilled.

"Solid, true, pure and precious as diamonds. If only life were so simple, I have often thought," wrote Kinsella. "If only there were a framework to life, [external standards] to live by. But suddenly I see, like a silver flash of lightning on the horizon, a meaning I have never grasped before.... Within the baselines anything can happen. Tides can reverse; oceans can open. That's why they say, 'The game is never over until the last man is out.' Colors can change, lives can alter, anything is possible in this gentle, flawless, loving game."

"Is this heaven?" the characters in "Field of Dreams" ask Kinsella over and over. "No, it's only Iowa," he replies. Is this heaven, this landscape in which you and I dream? In this gentle, flawless, loving game of life there is only the familiar,

only what you are capable of seeing because of an internal moral compass, only what you are ready to see because of faith in God's promises. Redeem the familiar and discover a vision for the future. Like Mary, choose the best portion. For it shall not be taken away from you.

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