

Yr. C, Proper 11
July 21, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1566 Words

Lessons: Genesis 18:1-10a
Psalm 15
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

The touch of her smooth fingers on the top of my hand was an unmistakable signal. Her skin was as soft as a baby's, worn thin—you could even say *polished*—by ninety-three years of exposure to the changes and chances of this mortal life. The soft touch of Dorothy's hand was an invitation for me to sit and visit a while.

This kind of tender invitation is often near to us, whether we realize it or not. The wise among us seek it—like Mary did when she sat at the feet of Jesus to visit for a while. The rest of us *might* recognize the invitation occasionally, but only if we are willing to pause our continuous, partial attention to everything else.

You see, we have a magical power at our fingertips, made possible through a most impersonal god—the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent 4G network. Our 'smart devices' are so seductive because they are our magic wands.

They produce miraculously crisp color and music and video. We can solicit miraculously precise information and intelligence with a touch. We can effortlessly transmit our thoughts and likes and allegiances. We can promptly transmit our orders that we want delivered to our doorsteps.

Let's face it, we've wanted a magic wand like this since we were kids! We have always wanted this kind of magical power at our fingertips!

But what if the real power is not *at* our fingertips, but *in* our fingertips? What if real godly and human power is to touch another person, not just a magical, crystal screen? What if real godly and human power is to sit at the feet of a beloved friend or family member, like Mary did in this Gospel story...and just visit a while?

Dorothy found love in the midst of war. I wonder what my Uncle George thought the first time she touched *his hand*. Like Martha, he was worried and distracted by many things. He was a young soldier far from home, sent to England to fight in a world at war. I imagine when George heard Dorothy's voice...and felt the touch of her hand on his hand...that his knees became so weak he *needed* to sit and visit a while.

Many of us have experienced that kind of weakness in the knees. It might be love's way of showing us how to be reverent—brought low—by the sound of a tender voice or the feel of a gentle touch. What if real godly and human power is to sit at the feet of a beloved friend or family member, like Mary did...and just visit a while?

"Could I get you something to drink?" asked Aunt Dot with her mesmerizing, English accent. Now, she was not physically strong enough to stand and serve Kim or me something to drink, but she meant every word. A heart for service *never* grows weak, even at ninety-three years old.

"No thank you, Dot. We just want to sit and visit a while." I said. I started to add, "I just wanted to come hold your hand and hear your voice." But she *already* had taken my hand in hers. So, my choice was clear. I would sit right there on the floor next to her recliner.

What if Jesus was praising Mary, who sat at his feet and listened; not because of *who he is*, but because of *what she chose to do* as a beloved friend? You see, our instinct is to think of how Mary was taking Jesus seriously. Yet, the whole thrust of this sweet story is about how Jesus took Mary—and her sister Martha—seriously.

So, I think we have it all backward. If we look carefully at this story, we'll see that Jesus did not *rebuke* Martha. He *invited* Martha...to choose the better part...to be fully present as a beloved friend.

It is not a gift to be worried and distracted. It is a gift to be *present*—as a beloved person, with other beloved people. Jesus enlarged the space *and the invitation* so that Martha as well as Mary could receive this gift. No, this story is not about how Mary took him seriously. The story is about how Jesus took *both of them* seriously.

Our real power is not *at* our fingertips...it's *in* our fingertips...it's in the simple power of holding hands and sharing stories! We discover real, godly and human power when we offer our full, undivided attention to other people. We practice using this power when we listen carefully and speak tenderly, as beloved people do.

And practicing this power with our beloved makes it possible for us to practice respectful listening and speaking with other people we do not know or love as well. The more we practice, the more we discover the very real power in other peoples' stories, not just our own. You see, our true power is revealed when—like Jesus—we take other people seriously, not when we puff ourselves up so other people will take us seriously.

This is the beauty of a mission experience like our youth and adults just shared in Ecuador—the chance to devote full, undivided attention to other peoples' stories...to listen carefully and speak tenderly with people we *don't know* and discover the God between us. Notice how today's story of Abraham shows us how *he was blessed* by the strangers he did *not know*—the people he invited to sit and visit a while.

“Aunt Dot,” I said, “Please tell me the story again about how you came by yourself to America. Tell me what it was like to arrive in tiny, Mountville, S.C. on a train.” I hardly gave her a chance to begin. “Tell me how scary it was to take such a big, risky chance on love.” And then I sat quietly at her feet and listened...still mesmerized after all these years by the sound of her voice...and by the beauty and power of her story.

Dear people, we are living in a time of fear, anger, and division. And this fear, anger, and division is stoked by the magical, *impersonal* power at our fingertips. The technology itself is not to blame; the hardness of human hearts is to blame. Yet, it is also true that this impersonal network power magnifies the dangers for all of us. For just as easily as we can use this power at our fingertips, so also can we misuse it. Just as easily as we can manipulate this power at our fingertips, so also can we be manipulated by it.

One question worth asking yourself is whether you are growing more or less able to sit and listen to other peoples' stories with full, undivided attention. Once we are able to fully listen to the stories of those we know and love. Then, we may be able to practice listening and considering the stories of those we don't know or love. Perhaps, if we imitate the way of Jesus, we might even take seriously...and sit with...and listen to...and touch...people with whom we don't share the same opinion or culture or ideology or religion or skin color.

The Rev. Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest and author. I had an opportunity to hear him speak a number of years ago at my seminary. He applied his monastic insight to turn this conventional maxim inside out. We've all heard the saying, “Don't just sit there, do something!” Well, Richard Rohr's advice is much more in line with the invitation Jesus extended to Martha: “Don't just do something, sit there.” Boy are those words easy to understand, and so hard to follow.

Two thousand years ago Jesus spoke to Martha, worried and distracted as she was by many things. And Jesus still speaks to us, worried and distracted *as we are* by many things. It is not a rebuke, dear people. It is an invitation. And we have the power within ourselves to accept this invitation.

The assurance Jesus gives us in this sweet story is that Mary has chosen the better part. “Not only that,” he says, “but this ‘better part’ will not be taken away from her.” It is a gift we get to keep.

I treasured the experience of sitting on that floor next to Aunt Dot, and hearing the stories of her courage and love as an immigrant who came to America. I treasured the gentle touch of holding her hand.

She was one of the very first people through whom I experienced the delight of giving my full, undivided attention to a story that was different from mine. As a little boy, she was one of the people who first showed me the beauty of encountering voices, cultures, and ideas from people not exactly like me.

Real, godly and human power is not *at* our fingertips, it's *in* our fingertips. Real power is discovered in listening with full, undivided attention. If we start using this power with the people we *do* know and love, we might have a crack at using this power with people we don't know or love...until, finally, if we continue in the way of Jesus...we will learn to listen for—and respect—the dignity of every human being.

So, don't just do something; sit there...listen...and pray...with your full, undivided attention. Choose the better part. It will not be taken away.

Amen.