

# Sermons at St. Paul's

*A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name*

July 18, 2010, Proper 11, the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Reverend Nancy Burton Dilliplane

In the name of the One, Holy and Triune God, Amen.

Well, now that there are only a couple of weeks left in my ministry with you here at St. Paul's, I probably ought to admit something to you. Sometimes, Jesus exasperates me. Just when I think I've got a pretty clear picture of who he is, and what he's all about, and what he means when he says "Follow me!" Jesus says or does something that catches me off guard and makes me rethink most of what I thought I knew.

The story of Mary and Martha is a good example. For many hot summer Sundays now, we've been hearing stories full of praise for those who take an active role in pursuing God's kingdom—those who extend hospitality, those who **go** and **do**. We've heard about the virtue of putting our hands to the kingdom plow and forging ahead without waiting to say goodbye or bury the dead. We've heard God's peace called down upon the homes of those who shelter and feed Jesus' disciples. Last week's gospel story about the unexpected neighbor who went out of his way to provide help and care to a man who fell among thieves began and ended with these words: Go and do likewise and you shall live. Go and do. Ok, got it. To be a follower of Jesus, I must put my faith into action and care for others.

And so, this week, when it is Jesus himself who comes to the door seeking hospitality, and Martha drops everything and flies into action to make him welcome and to care for him, we might expect him to praise her. But he doesn't. Poor Martha gets a sad shaking of Jesus' head. It's her sister, Mary, who is *doing* nothing who receives the praise. Honestly, sometimes Jesus flat out exasperates me!

After all these weeks of spurring us to action, now Jesus says, don't just do something—sit there! And he has the nerve to call that the better part? Please! It's taken me all week to get over my pique with Jesus. All week, and the rereading of this passage—the Martha and Mary story—in Eugene Peterson's Bible paraphrase *The Message*. In Peterson's retelling of Luke's story, Jesus doesn't tell Martha that Mary has chosen *the better part*, he tells her that Mary has chosen *the main course*.

Peterson's choice of words suggests that life in God's kingdom is a great banquet, with God at its center. God is the reason for the feast and Jesus—the Love of God Incarnate—is main course.

The sumptuous feast that Peterson envisions stands in marked contrast to the bleak words of Amos we heard this morning. It's not a feast, but a famine that Amos foretells. And no ordinary famine of drought and crop failure, either—"not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,

but of hearing the words of the LORD.” A famine of the word of God. Amos envisions a time when the People of God will no longer have God in their midst.

“The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” (passing by in the sense of God passing by Moses or Elijah). God will remove God’s presence from among the people. The people will hunger and thirst for God’s presence, but God will not be there.

I wonder whether the reason that there is so much emphasis on food and feasting in the Gospel of Luke is that Luke wants us to know that the famine of God’s word is finally over. In Jesus, the Word of God, God has returned to the people. God is once again in our midst. Feast has replaced famine.

In today’s story, it is Mary who understands this most clearly. She sits down to feast upon Word of God. When God is present, the best thing to do is to pull up a chair! Mary chooses the main course.

But Martha understands something as well. She understands something about why the famine Amos foretold came about in the first place. The famine of God’s word was because God’s people had ceased to lay the banquet table:

In the picture that Amos paints, the people neglect the poor, trample the needy and deal unjustly with each other. And they can scarcely wait for the Sabbath to be over so they can resume their exploitative, cheating, self-serving ways. And so God tells Amos that soon there will be no reason to keep the Sabbath—no reason to come to the banqueting table. When God’s people fail to live by God’s principles, God will not be with them. When people no longer lay the banquet table, there can be no feast.

Martha and her frantic desire to serve knows that active service, radical hospitality, ongoing and singlehearted enactment of the principles of God’s kingdom are important. It is important to actively--Amos again—“hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate”; We must get busy in order to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Our active lives of service--living out God’s principles—are the means by which we help God to spread the banquet table for the world.

Mary knows that when God is present, one must sit down to the feast. Martha knows that without adequate preparation, the banquet won’t be spread. Both sisters have something to show us about God’s kingdom. It takes both of them to welcome Jesus, and in their living room in Bethany the famine foretold in Amos is reversed. The famine is over. Set the table, and don’t forget to pull up a chair.

Last week, Carroll Sheppard preached about Amos, too. She talked about Amos’ plumb line—a filament with a lead weight at one end that is drawn straight and true to the center of the earth by gravity. Like the plumb line Jesus points the way, straight and true, to the heart of God. And by

that straight line—that plum line—we are able to measure how truly our lives reflect the life of God.

St. Paul's is in the midst of a plumb-line moment, she said. Our time of sharing ministry is coming to an end. After three years as your assistant rector, I am leaving to become the rector of a parish in Maryland. As hard as good-byes are, they are also times of opportunity. Carroll invited us to spend our last weeks together thinking about the ways that we have shown one another God's plumb line. So I'd like to use the last few minutes of my sermon time today to do just that, to reflect a little on how St. Paul's has shown me the straight line to God's heart.

Or, to use today's gospel metaphor, I'll share with you a little of what St. Paul's has taught me about God's banquet—both about preparing the table, and about pulling up a chair and choosing the main course.

In three years you have taught me a lifetime about spreading the table—and about making a place for everyone at God's feast. You've helped me to understand what it means to hate evil and love good, to establish justice and to let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

You've taught me about setting the table with sheer hard work in the physical labor of preparing for the annual rummage sale—sorting, cleaning, lugging, pricing, and spending countless hours in the heat and humidity of Philadelphia summer—so that, come September, some might find clothing, home goods, furniture and electronics at bargain prices. And you've modeled God's self-giving love, in that the considerable proceeds from that sale don't stay here, within these walls, but go out into the community to help feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked and nurture creativity and beauty. If rummage is Martha, it is also Mary. Rummage has also shown me the main course—in the community formed among rummage volunteers. Rummage creates family out of strangers, brings generations together, and builds connections with the past and the future.

You've been Martha, setting the table by offering a temporary home to Interfaith Hospitality Network families, cooking meals, helping with childcare and homework. And, with Mary, I've feasted on the main course, when shared meals turned into shared stories, dancing, pet snakes and a deeper understanding of what it means to be human—and homeless—in Philadelphia.

Together we have set the table by making casseroles for Bethesda Project, sewing school bags for Africa, collecting toiletries for Laurel House, and food for St. Vincent's food cupboard. And together we've feasted on the Word of God, when we've listened to Bethesda's Angelo Sgro preach during Holy Week about the lopsided distribution of suffering in the world, and bearing other's sorrows, or heard Dan's first hand story about his journey from homelessness to independent living.

I've sometimes felt like Martha, busy with many things as I've helped to develop and strengthen our Godly Play program. And in the circle of your children, I've been Mary, sharing the main course when 7-year-olds have pointed out God in our midst, and 3 year olds have prayed: "Thank you God for all the children, and thank you for me."

You Marthas have weeded beds and watered flowers and made maps and letterhead and changed light bulbs, and polished wood and slate and brass, that all who come as Mary to St. Paul's might feast at the banquet table in the beauty of holiness.

Martha and Mary alike have set the table and feasted upon it accompanied by St. Paul's incomparable choirs, as well as by African Drummers, and tambourines, and pew percussion, and in the 7 a.m. silence of a Wednesday morning. Our music, and our silence, contributes to the feast's richness.

And Mary and Martha alike, we've been called to the banquet by the smell of bacon as well as the smell of healing oil, by Easter lilies and funeral lilies and bridal bouquets, and by the oil of roses in solidarity with the homeless.

As Martha you have shown me how you spread God's table for the world, by tutoring, and delivering flowers, and giving money for shelter boxes, and spending weeks in Haiti, or Israel/Palestine, or North Dakota, or Kensington. And as Mary, you show that you have chosen the main course when you've returned from around the world with stories of how your lives have been changed.

We have feasted on the Word of God—over soup and Christmas Carols, with the Devil and Jean Mather, with EfM on Thursdays and the lectionary Bible Study on Wednesdays, and you've taught me that God's is soup that improves the more people who share it. We've enjoyed the spice provided by new diners, and tasted the salt of tears for those who no longer share our table.

We've spread the table and banqueted together on altar tables and hospital trays and round folding tables. Over and over again in these three years we have shared, you have showed me that two things are necessary. Martha and Mary. Serving and Feasting.

Martha knows that without adequate preparation, the banquet won't be spread. Mary knows that when God is present, one must sit down to the feast. Saint Paul's has shown me the truth possessed by both sisters. It takes both of them to welcome and to follow Jesus. Here, in Chestnut Hill, the famine foretold in Amos is being reversed.

You have showed me, as you will continue to show all who come, that the famine is over. So set the table, and don't forget to pull up a chair.

Amen.