

Have you ever noticed the difference that tone of voice makes? How the same words can be spoken with a different tone, and be received and experienced differently? That's wonderful! That's wonderful. I'm fine! I'm fine!!!!

One of the ways we are fed is through our scriptures. When we read scripture silently, the voice in our head sets the tone for how we hear those words, a voice that comes with its own interpretation and background story. So too, when we hear the word of God read aloud, how it sounds — where and how the words are emphasized by the reader, can make all the difference in how we receive and understand them.

I wonder, how did the words in our Gospel land with you today? The story of Martha and Mary's encounter with Jesus is a familiar one for many of us. Luke paints the scene: Jesus and his disciples are journeying toward Jerusalem, and come to a village where a woman, Martha, welcomes Jesus into her home, and her sister Mary sets her attention upon the Lord, sitting at his feet.

Luke tells us that Martha was distracted by her many tasks. From just this part of the story we might make some assumptions. The first is that Martha was a woman of independent means. Although we learn later of her brother Lazarus, it is her home into which Jesus has been welcomed, not his. That she is distracted by her tasks might indicate that she is focused: upon the extension of hospitality for her guest, or other concerns for her household. Further, we learn that she has a sister, and that that sister has come to sit with Jesus, to hear what he has to say.

We, at St. Dunstan's, do hospitality well. We might easily imagine the many tasks needing Martha's attention as she plays host to Jesus. We might recall a time in our own lives when we have been left to do the work, or when our tasks and responsibilities have caused us to miss out, unable to participate in conversation and time with our guests. We might also resonate with Mary: away from the busy work, hanging with our company. Caution is given to the tendency to understand Mary and Martha in a dualistic way — that is, to name and blame or make one right and the other wrong. For both express hospitality toward Jesus, albeit in different ways.

Just last week we heard as Jesus told of the importance of generous acts of hospitality. To love and serve others is a part of our call and is important. To be able to extend ourselves well to our neighbors or beloved house guests requires both preparation and presence.

How we hear the tone in Martha's words, and those Jesus speaks to her in reply, informs our understanding of the story. In Martha, we may hear complaint, whining, or the pleading of one who feels the situation is unfair. Or, we might hear in Martha's speaking one who, like Mary, longs also to slow down and sit at the Lord's feet, but consumed by her have-to-do's, is unable to ask for help, and so, demands it.

As we read and listen to Jesus' response, do we hear impatience, irritation? Is he critical or defensive? Or, might we hear in his voice a compassion and tenderness for one whom he loves, who so wrapped up in her doing, cannot find her way to him? Perhaps in denying her request, Jesus is redirecting her to what she most needs.

Rather than a matter of right and wrong, Jesus seems to be helping Martha to see recognize the choice before her — the choices to choose, in this moment while he is present, the better part. To draw near to him and to be fed by his presence and words. The rest, for this moment, can wait.

This is a practice we employ within our worship service. After gathering together, we are first called to hear and to be fed by God's word. More than anything, the invitation is simply, to be present, listen and to receive. Of course, it is not so simple, perhaps, to quiet the many thoughts we think. We may be distracted, with much on our minds. Still, before the table is set, before the body and blood of Christ is shared, before we are blessed and sent into the world to do all that God has called us to do, we are first invited pause from the busy-ness of our lives and to choose, in this moment, the better part — so that we can emerge from this sanctuary fed and ready to return to work.

Like an electric car that takes time to re-charge, we must pause and take time to recharge our spiritual batteries, to be reconnected to the center of all our serving, giving and loving. And, we must be aware of just how far our battery will take us. If we do not plan to stop for rest and re-charging, we will find our battery depleted, and ourselves stopped. Here with Martha, generous giver of hospitality, and her sister Mary, generous giver of attention, we witness the fullness and wholeness of what it is to be a disciple of Jesus, people who strive to not only extend ourselves in selfless and generous hospitality to others, but perhaps more so, people whose hospitality is fueled and fed by our relationship with Jesus. It is not an either/or situation, but rather a both/and.

Certainly the distractions and preoccupations of our lives may deter us from being fed. And we all know that when we're not fed, when we are hungry, we can become irritable, short tempered, and may even act out.

One of the most visible roles in a church on Sundays is that of the greeters. They are the first point of contact called to greet and welcome, answer questions and give direction, so being warm and friendly is important. I remember a greeter at the first episcopal church I attended, Charles, who was exceptional. He would arrive early to ensure all was ready, and his smile and generosity left members and guests alike feeling seen and heard. But one day, Charles was off his game. Instead of being his usual helpful and friendly self, he was irritable and impatient. Noticing the same, the Sr. Warden asked, "Charles, have you had breakfast?" "He responded, "Oh, I'm fine." "Charles," she said, "have you eaten?" "No," he said, "I didn't have time". "Ok," she said, "Take a moment to get a cup of coffee and a pastry. We've got things covered." And when he returned refueled and recharged, Charles was himself again.

When we forget to make and take time to be fed, literally and spiritually, we like Charles, or like Martha, may become distracted. Frustration, irritation, fear or worry may cause us to lose sight of what matters. Can we pause to hear the voice of Jesus that breaks in to our busy-ness, that calls us into balance, that reminds us that to do and be all that we are, first, we must be fed.

For what are you hungry today? And how might Jesus feed you?