

The 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2007  
Stephen Edmondson

“Here we are together....”

I don't know if I'll normally preach from down here in the future. There's something nice about having a pulpit to hold onto my words for me—I'm fairly confident that in September and October that I'll use a pulpit. It's a first rule of preaching—never work without notes with a month old baby. But for today, I wanted to be here with all of you. I've so looked forward to being with you.... I mean that really. I planned this part of my sermon over a year ago, when I first thought seriously that I might return to a parish and ministry with you and leave my life in academia. I didn't know what else I would say, and at that time I didn't know where I would be saying it, but I knew that in my first sermon I wanted to be down here with you, to tell you that I've missed you. To let you know how glad I am to be back.

Aelred of Rievaulx begins his book on Spiritual Friendship, “Here we are together, you and me and Christ with us.” Aelred is a 12<sup>th</sup> century monk from the north of England. You'll probably hear of him a lot from me—he's one of my favorite spiritual writers, along with Julian of Norwich. But that's what I've missed—you and I together, and Christ with us. That's what we have here—a togetherness..., a community..., a love. And there's this promise that Christ is with us in this togetherness. Paul alludes to this in his letter to the Colossians—he speaks of the mystery of Christ in us, and he means each of us—that's a thought—but also and especially Christ in and with and among us together. There's something sacred here, something holy, something of the truth of life when we're together.

Aelred wrote his book on spiritual friendship because of his deep commitment to that notion of community and togetherness. He believed that there was a special blessing in time spent with one another, but the ultimate goal of that blessing is one that we don't think of often—it prepares us for life together with God, Aelred says. God is a togetherness—that's the whole Father, Son, and Spirit thing that we say---communion is at the very heart of God, and in Jesus God has invited us into life with God. But we have to be ready for it—ready for communion—and so we practice with each other. So I'm glad to be here. I need the practice and I will enjoy immensely, I think, practicing communion with you.

I want to talk about the story of Mary and Martha this morning, in part because it relates to the whole thing of our togetherness, but mainly because it's such a great story. I know that a lot of folks hear the story and relate to Martha—it's no fun to be the one doing all the work. I have to admit that I like the story—I take it as divine validation for the messiness of my office as I read theological books. I'm guessing that's not what Jesus meant.

But there is that tendency to resonate with Martha in the story, to feel like she's getting a raw deal. The work does have to get done. Somebody has to do it. So why shouldn't

Mary help? Why is it all left to Martha? Martha's part resonates strongly with life in Northern Virginia, the constant busyness—so much to get done—so much that's important—work, and family, and exercise, and Church. It's what I heard in your parish profile—there's so much to do, and if we don't do it, then who will? And it's so important—it has to be done. This is where we live. Martha—she's us. Who knew it, that we'd be in the bible, but there we are.

The thing I like about Jesus' answer to Martha—he doesn't argue with her. He doesn't tell her that all that she's doing isn't important. He, after all, tells stories himself of the diligent householder and the whole of Scripture talks about the importance of acts of hospitality.... She's serving—that's his whole schtick, that we're to be servants! So he doesn't argue with her. He doesn't dismiss the importance of her work. He just asks her to notice what she's doing to herself. Martha, he says, have you noticed how worried you are? Have you noticed how all of this is just dragging you around---that's the literal sense of one of those words in the text for distracted—she's being drug around by so many things. She's turbulent. Her mind is in an uproar. I need you to try to imagine what that would be like, because I'm sure that none of you have had this experience as you've run from one commitment to the next, not sure how the traffic light on Dolly Madison can last 8 minutes before it changes....

Jesus asks Martha to notice what she's doing to herself. She's destroying herself. The term from the Christian spiritual tradition would be that she's dissipating herself—she's scattering herself about, so that there's nothing left at the heart of her. You can't do that, Jesus is saying. No matter how important the task, you can't destroy yourself in the process. That's not why God made you. God made you to be with me, Jesus is saying, to sit with me. God made you for communion. That's what holds you together—that gathers you—that let's you be whole.

Jesus never tells Martha not to serve, but he reminds her that she was made for communion—with God—with those around her—she was made to sit at Jesus' feet. So it is with us, we were made for God, for each other, to sit at Jesus feet. Now there are any number of ways to do that—in prayer, with Scripture—but surely if Jesus is here with us when we're together, then here we sit at Jesus' feet. Here we realize the communion for which we were made. This is the one needful thing, and so I'm so glad to be here with you. I missed you, missed the communion, missed sitting with Jesus.

But I don't want to make it sound easy. Letting go of the tasks is hard—that's how we define ourselves, after all—through all of the things with which we're busy. Letting go of the tasks is hard, and it can be even harder to sit at Jesus feet, especially if we do that through our communion together. It's hard to do community—in the first place, it gives us so much more to be busy with---just ask the vestry how many times we've met in just my first week.... But even more, there's the friction we have to work through. The ways that we hurt each other, all the things for which we must forgive one another. That's why Aelred thinks that friendship and community are so important for us. They teach us compassion, and honesty and forgiveness. They teach us how to really love.

One of the things that drew me to this Church is my sense—from your profile and talking with the search committee—my sense that you knew how to love. You live love, in many ways. It means that, like Martha, you know how to serve one another, but even more it means that, like Mary, you know how to be together, how to sit together and be in the presence of Christ through that togetherness. There have been hurts and misunderstandings, and all kinds of things to cause tension among you in the last two years, and yet even in a time of uncertainty, you have weathered these together. You've forgiven, you've been compassionate and caring. You've been Jesus to one another—that's the mystery of Christ within us that Paul writes about.

What a privilege I have, to be here with you. What a blessing. We will have so much to do together in the coming years, but right now I'm just happy to be here with you, and to soak it all in.

Amen.