When I was a senior in high school, I was talked into entering the Miss United Way contest. I was one of six or seven high school girls who represented the United Way during its fund raising drive. We contestants went to banquets and meetings in the community. We rode on a float in the Christmas parade. We rode on the backs of convertibles during halftime at a football game. Our role was to drum up interest in the United Way and all the organizations it supported. This was not to be a beauty or popularity contest, we were told. I believed that, at least in the beginning. Looking back now, I don't see how it couldn't have been about appearance or personality, because at the end of the season, a winner was crowned Miss United Way. Only one girl could wear the crown; there would be one winner and five losers. Once we realized that, the competition began.

We were told that the official colors of the United Way were green and white, so we should wear those colors at all of our appearances. At that time in my life, I made almost all of my clothes, so I sewed up a dress, some pants and couple of tops in the appropriate colors and I alternated wearing the outfits during the campaign. I noticed that some of the other girls had a new *store bought* outfit for each appearance and that their hair and makeup were always perfect. I had short hair that didn't take long to style and I was lucky to remember to put some makeup on most days. We contestants had a phone tree so we could pass along dates and times we were expected to be at events. When I and some others were told wrong information and didn't show up when we were supposed to, I began to realize I was in over my head. What had started out as a great volunteer activity, raising awareness of an important organization, turned into just another way to pit young women against one another. The prettiest girl with the best personality was destined to win and of course she did.

This is what we do in our culture, isn't it? Long before girls reach high school, we tell them how important it is to look good; sometimes we even emphasize appearance over heart and soul. We pit girls and women against one another as if most of life were a competition. We women size one another up all the time, calculating where we stand as to looks, smarts and popularity. I won't even go into all the money we women spend on cosmetics, hair care and clothing, not to look good to men or women in a romantic way, but to climb at least a rung or two on the women’s competition ladder.

This competition of women against one another is not a new thing. Today, we read about Mary and Martha, who, along with their brother Lazarus, are good friends of Jesus. Jesus stops in at the women's home, probably to eat a good meal and maybe spend the night. Martha has been working her tail off, cleaning up the house and cooking an extravagant meal. When Jesus arrives, Martha is still hard at work, putting the final touches on the meal, while her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to what he has to say. Martha has had enough. She asks Jesus, “Haven't you noticed that I've been working hard while Mary just sits there listening to you?” It's obvious to Martha that she should be praised for all the work she has done to make Jesus comfortable. If Mary isn't going to help with the work, then Martha wants some recognition – some kind of prize – for all she has done. Martha may be her sister, but the competition is on for the prize of *best* sister.

Martha is surprised by what Jesus has to say. “Martha, Martha,” Jesus begins. Most likely, Jesus is not speaking sternly to Martha but with affection that comes through in his voice. The Message Bible translates Jesus' words this way, “Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing is essential, and Mary has chosen it – it's the main course, and won't be taken from her.”

He could add these words “Dear Martha, life in the kingdom of God is not about competition. Look at your sister and learn from her.” What Mary is doing is remarkable in her culture. Mary has taken the posture of a disciple, sitting at Jesus' feet and learning from him. This is unheard of, that a woman would presume to be a disciple of Jesus. Women are expected to act more like Martha, showing hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. It is hard to imagine, though, that Jesus is trying to pit the sisters against one another, to stoke the fire of competition between them. If we look more closely at the story, we realize that Martha has herself done something radical. We read that when Jesus entered the town, Martha invited him to her home. This is a bit deal, also. Only men have the right to invite someone to one's home.

Bruce Prewer writes, “Maybe (just maybe; no certainty) one of the reasons for what seems like a rebuke to Martha was that Martha had exerted her new-found liberty to invite Jesus to the house, yet then gets annoyed when her sister Mary dares to express her new liberty by daring to acting like a man might.” So what do we have here? We have two sisters who dare to step out of the boxes that define them and take their rightful place alongside Jesus. If they can tamp down their tendency toward competition, and listen to Jesus, they will find that he is welcoming them into a whole new way of life, one in which they are not hindered by their gender, but valued for who they are and invited to take their place at Jesus' feet as his disciples. As Martha and Mary have learned, competition, seeking approval from Jesus for oneself and not for another, is counter to what Jesus is all about. For Jesus' love, his call to discipleship, is a gift. It is not something that can be earned or stolen from another for oneself. It pulls us together to work in cooperation with one another, not in competition.

Mary and Martha have something to teach us. If our lives are all about working, achieving, managing tasks, moving, climbing, perpetual motion, we have lost the opportunity shown by the posture of Mary, the chance to sit at Jesus' feet and learn how he would have us live our lives. Thomas Merton writes, “To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to the violence of our times.” I think Merton is on to something. If, as disciples, we get so caught up in the minutiae of discipleship, the details, the busy work, (which, by the way, is the danger of every pastor,) we miss what we can learn by being quiet, by listening to God's call to us as individuals and as the body of Christ. If we spend all our time listening and no time in action, we fail to act as Christ in our communities and in our world.

The Christian life is all about cooperation and not competition. Martha and Mary show us by their example that it is possible to live differently than what our culture teaches, to listen and pray and act in ways that build up the body of Christ instead of tearing it down. For we, sisters and brothers in Christ have a lot of work to do in our broken world. When we put aside competition in favor of cooperation, we paint for the world a portrait of peace. We show what is possible to a world that so often encourages us to work against one another rather than in unity, so that may speak out against fear and bloodshed instead of contributing to it. When we refuse to be highjacked by forces that deny the value of every single woman, man and child, we instead become who Christ has called us to be - messengers of hope, of change and of love, of light that scatters the darkness around us. So disciples, dear disciples, let us not fuss far too much and get ourselves worked up over nothing. Let us kneel at Jesus' feet and listen closely to what he has to say. Let us be so moved by his call for justice and peace that we then get worked up over the things that truly matter – God's truth in a world of lies, God's love in the face of hate, God's will to unite against the forces that divide us, God's strength which will overcome all weakness.

Amen.

*Pentecost 9C*

*July 10, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 10: 38-42*

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