

AMOS 8:1-12 or GENESIS 18:1-10a

PSALM 52 or PSALM 15

COLOSSIANS 1:15-28

LUKE 10:38-42

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost; Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 17, 2022; Year C

A Place, the Place, for Everyone!

“A woman’s place!” And you get to finish that sentence! Be careful now! For years many of us became accustomed to hearing the tired, old, worn-out phrase, a horrible cliché, “A woman’s place is in the home!” It was a kinder and gentler, a more benign, even somewhat more politically correct way of saying that women were supposed to be barefoot and pregnant, demur and quiet, always deferring to their husbands who surely knew better than a woman about just about anything. As Walter Cronkite used to say at the end of the news, give or take a few words, “And, that’s the way it was!” Once upon a time meets not so much! Once upon a time meets not so happily ever after! The Bible even reinforces this kind of ridiculously inane nonsense. I Timothy (2:8-15), attributed to Paul but probably, more likely, written by an unknown author who sought credibility for his composition and so, in order to achieve that goal, he summarily gave the apostle credit, declaring, “I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument. Also, that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing—evidently the writer did not care what the men wore—not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls—get rid of your jewelry, ladies—I see that bling out there—or expensive clothes—the thrift store is right down the street—but with good works—ah, works, that word, now we are getting the picture, a huge hint—as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to

teach or have authority over a man! She is to keep silent! For Adam was born first—so what—then Eve! And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor—yes, blame women for everything, including the advent of sin—Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty!” Ah, the pressure is on. It is a woman’s responsibility for the way the children turn out as adults! Can I get an “Amen,” ladies? Ah, but speaking of the self-appointed apostle Paul, he writes in I Corinthians (33b-36), unless he did not compose it, (there is much debate about authorship of this diatribe), “As in all churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says (I thought Paul had put the law in its place). If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you (Ouch)? Or are you the only ones it has reached?” Wow, what a backwards, retro, composition! This is the same Paul who affirms women in other texts, for example, Phoebe, the first female deacon, and Lydia, a dealer in purple who was converted and hosted Paul in her home. These radical discrepancies create a rather schizophrenic theology at best! It is obvious as we all know full well, that Paul never met Jesus and it is painfully apparent that he really did not know much about the rabbi, definitely not enough about the teacher and his way and ways!

Ah, those days we remember with nostalgia, the likes of Ozzie and Harriet, Leave it to Beaver, and ironically, My Three Sons, a show that showed the difficulties, the near impossibility, of keeping a household afloat without a strong feminine presence, a soft, gentle, touch! Some dare to call these the good old days, salad days, halcyon days reflecting a Camelot Americana existence that never really existed. Some would say that these were the days when America was great or at its greatest. Well, as we all know full well, that perspective is always a matter of

perspective, knowing that where you sit or stand determines what you see. Sensory awareness, any modicum of intuitive sensitivity, always depends on your existential perception, your experiential reality. As we all know full well, there are a host of people throughout history whose experiences do not reflect in any way the fanciful mythologies that passed for reality by the majority back in the day, all of us now realizing that this civic utopia, for many intents and purposes, was nothing more than a mirage, a fantasy, a colossal world of make believe. Yes, objects in the rearview mirror are closer than they appear because they are an inaccurate depiction of reality. Sometimes history resembles way too much the images seen in a fun house mirror, completely and utterly distorted in every way, literally, imaginable. Yes, thankfully we have come a long way, especially when we consider the plight of women around the world in places like Afghanistan, ruled by primitive peoples known as the Taliban, and in Saudi Arabia, the place where our president is doing our bidding while holding his nose, all of us resembling that remark. Why, recently they even passed a law allowing women to drive and to even be unaccompanied by a male chaperone! Oh, the progress the leaps and bounds, civilization is making! Seriously! Yet even in our own country women are under attack, as is their freedom, their unbound, unfettered, conscience, their full opportunity to life and the pursuit of happiness. Unbelievable! We, all of us are in this fight, this struggle for independence, are not out of the woods, not as long as women are not allowed by law to control their own bodies, as long as their physical rights are subject to the whims of the state! There is a joke now circulating that if men were able to get pregnant, you would be able to get an abortion medical procedure where you get your oil changed, at a gas station, or convenient store! My hunch is that there is some truth in these caustic words! Really!

I bring all these myriad mental images to mind this morning because today we get to read one of the shortest but most provocative and enlightening texts in all the Gospel narratives, a story describing one

enchanted evening at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, three of Jesus' closest friends. All these themes I have named contain a veritable mix of the good, bad, and ugly, all these vivid images clearly at play! It is a wonderful story full of mystery and intrigue because it demands of the reader, forces each biblical explorer, to make interpretive judgments that do not readily or even remotely appear on the page in black and white and sometimes red. What was the nature of Jesus' and Mary's relationship? Rumors have abounded for centuries despite a patriarchally led Church that sought to hold onto power by putting the kibosh, to squash this innuendo in every way. What was Mary's role as a disciple? According to one noncanonical source, she was the first among the group, yes, even surpassing the authority and status of a steadfastly loyal—except when he was not, and very jealous Simon Peter, the Rock. Was this bellwether event Jesus' coming out party on the issue of female inclusiveness, his stand regarding the way he viewed the role of women in his mission and ministry, in the world, and in the realm of God? All these considerations are born from a simple dinner party, the kind of gathering that Jesus just seemed to enjoy, to relish in every way. He just loved to be invited and be a part of these soirées. After all, it is New Testament scholar Robert Karris who declares that you can literally “eat your way through Luke's Gospel!” **The rules of ancient nomadic turned Bedouin hospitality are vividly on display in this synoptic story. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes about ancient meals, meals in the ancient world, especially the Near Eastern part of it, were always more than mere meals, but were thickly impregnated, loaded with unspoken but very real and understood codes based on who was invited with special attentiveness to the guest list, and of course, the all-important meticulously planned seating arrangement. There is always more to a meal than what meets the eye, the palate, or the stomach! It is out of respect for these cultural nuances that Jesus describes the realm of God as part of his parabolic narrative, imaging God's realm as if it were a great banquet feast, a table where**

everyone, from the last and least to the greatest, the haves and have nots, the up and outs and the down and outs, all are welcomed and invited and are given an equal place at a place setting. Yes, go out into the highways and byways he says, and bring them one and all! Urge them, compel them all, to come and join in the great celebration at this wonderful all you can eat buffet, a smorgasbord of divine proportions. It is out of respect for the gospel that the writer of the epistle of James (2:1-9) condemns the actions at the agape meal that accompanied worship in the early Church because the leadership had established a seating chart that valued the VIPs while subjugating the lesser sorts to a lower place at the table. This perverse practice was counter-intuitive to everything that the rabbi had dear and zealously preached and taught and made a major plank during his lifetime. Yes, it was the foundation, the cornerstone, the very pillar, of his mission and ministry. Unacceptable behavior! Not in God's house! Not today, not tomorrow, not the next day! Never! Never! Never!

Here in a certain unnamed village, we are told that a woman named Martha welcomed Jesus and his entourage into her and her siblings' home. As per usual Jesus held court with those who had gathered for the meal and the evening's conversation, Jesus seemingly always turning from guest into host in these impromptu and planned settings. See the road to Emmaus story for a quintessential example! Well, at the outset of this dinner gathering all appears to be normal, routine, an average, ordinary get together among friends and acquaintances, the curious and the committed, nothing out of the ordinary or unusual in the offing. All that from a quick first glance! But, oh what a dinner party this one turned out to be! All bets are off whenever Jesus is in the house! Upon further review, however, something is not quite right, something is clearly amiss, in what should have been a typical pre-first century scenario. Martha, much like the Martha Stewart in our day, was going about her business, doing her thing. It is abundantly clear that Martha was the

consummate homemaker and loved to host these kinds of dinner parties. She excelled in these moments! Nothing goes undone or unchecked. The hors d'oeuvres are timely and hot while the meal slowly simmers in the kitchen. Everyone's wine glass is full and kept that way. Keep the libations pouring! If we run out, you know who will make more! Martha is busy making sure her guests are cared for, all the while hurried and harried, but no doubt intoxicated by the hysteria of movement, the excitement of the moment, as she whips and twirls. She is poetry in motion, except when she is not! Everything must be just right, perfect in every way, spot on, every place setting in its place. And don't ever mismatch the arrangement of knives and forks and spoons! What a disaster that would make! The ego of this hostess with the "mostess" surely must have been fed and fueled by the intoxicating feeling of immense pressure, the exhilaration of getting dinner on the table at the optimum temperature and in a timely manner

But suddenly, as if seemingly out of nowhere, Martha, the active one, realized that there is a glaring problem, that something is out of sorts, just not quite right. Yes, something is amiss! There is a reason she is so over the top busy. Her sister Mary, the contemplative, reflective, perhaps lazy, one, is sitting on her backside doing absolutely nothing to help, no assistance whatsoever, a veritable one-armed paper hanger. She has abandoned the servant role appointed for her, predestined since God only knows when. Just look at her, sitting at the feet of Jesus of all places. The audacity! The arrogance! The nerve! Come on, Mary, you know better! You know your place! Don't you? Frankly, Martha is an over-functioner. She is prim and proper, polite, and perhaps even a bit of a prude, demanding the protocols commensurate with these kinds of formal events, even if informality would have better served as the order of the day. We all know the type! We have seen them in action! Stay out of their way! Always anxious, overly concerned, obsessive-compulsive in a whole host of

ways. After all, it was Martha the micromanager at the tomb of her brother Lazarus, when Jesus dares suggest they open the tomb to let him out and set him free, blurts out for everyone within earshot to hear, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days!" That is one day beyond which it was believed the spirit or soul had supposedly left the body, proving that a corpse was indeed a corpse, that the deceased was DRT, dead right there! I love the King James translation, "He stinketh!" That describes a lot of things these days. But I digress; I often do! So rather than scolding her sister, Martha implores Jesus, of whom she is obviously displeased and disappointed, that, after all, it is the rabbi who is guilty of allowing this charade, this ridiculous spectacle, to take place under their roof. Martha does not rebuke Mary, ignoring the proverbial middleman in the story, irony intended, but goes to the source, the horse's mouth, the seat of power, the one who can right this wrong in an instant and put things right while putting Mary in her place. This error could easily be fixed in a nanosecond if Jesus only cared enough, just a little bit, to be attentive to Martha's miserable plight! Only Jesus could shame Mary into submission, sending her scurrying off to do what she ought to be doing, serving up some grub, dishing out the vittles, to fill all the men's hungry, ravished tummies, especially the "hangry" ones! I have always wanted to get that word in a sermon! Now we have a conundrum! No doubt everyone in the room was watching intently in suspense to see what Jesus would do, how he would react or respond. The result, the answer, would be the equivalent of watching a giant oak tree fall in a forest as Jesus quietly but sternly chops down the issue, leaving Martha hanging out to dry, giving her a rebuttal that she surely did not expect, that she certainly did not anticipate in the least, the very thing she would have never seen coming. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" Fair question. We sure do not expect Lazarus, a man, to lower himself and be of any worthwhile help in this situation. This was not man's work! It was certainly not his place! "Martha, Martha," Jesus calls out her

name twice, as if for effect, in a way that seemed to show pity, but not much sympathy. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one!” The silence must have been deafening! And then to add insult to injury, no doubt embarrassing, even humiliating Martha even further in the process, making her feel like a fool for broaching this faux pas, Jesus then adds for an even more pronounced, painfully poignant effect, putting Martha in her place, “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her!” Mary had found her place! Ouch! Oh me, or oh my! Wow! Yes, Lord, it is always Mary the golden girl in your life! Mary always gets a pass! Sis always gets and gets away with everything! It is so not fair! Favorites anyone?

Now before we make the homiletical observations that will finally turn this rambling literary journey into a sermon, a little further background is not only helpful but reveals some serious shock and awe about what was taking place in those most awkward of moments. For a woman to sit at the feet of a man was a serious indicator, an act that more than gave away any secrets but made transparent some relational nuances, in this specific case, some surprises! For a woman to sit at the feet of a man suggested that there was an intimacy at work in their relationship of a far more than casual or friendly nature. This, my friends, is where the rumor mill began and continues! See Dan Brown’s *The DaVinci Code* for an amusing and riveting novel based around some very real historical recollections driving this innuendo. This proximity between Jesus and Mary would have been anything but a casual occurrence, a nonchalant episode witnessed by countless individuals, but would have been an indicator that indeed something was up with the two of them, something in the offing. Otherwise, what we have in this intriguing story would be the height of transgression or trespass, a scandal of ginormous proportions, making for the ultimate salaciously seductive tale. Although, ironically, for many Christian believers, even a hint of this preposterous proposal, such a sordid suggestion, is the real scandal

at stake! It challenges all our preconceptions, all our sensibilities, about the person of Jesus of Nazareth, way too human for our comfort level! **Despite or because of all these cultural nuances, I would like to suggest that Jesus was making what was and is a most salient and serious point, a point for the ages, yes, including now, that everyone is not only entitled, but expected, at the feet of this amazing rabbi, the one who has not only the gift of gab, but presumably the very endearing words of eternal life, lessons we all need to embolden and empower us to live full lives, to be all that we can be, and yes, to get along fabulously with one another as we seek to build bridges, creating the best communally engaged global village that is possible in our complex world today. The men had long had a seat at the table, i.e., at the feet of whatever male master ruled their day. It was now time to level the playing field, to grant privilege to every woman whose stature and standing was no less great, no less in any way imaginable, than their male counterparts, to right an egregious wrong long supported by a “that’s just the way it is” tradition, all used to abuse, to justify an injustice, to elevate those who had long been diminished or dismissed, disregarded in any way, those who had been suppressed beyond recognition, all intentionally designed to restore a woman’s rightful place as she owns and celebrates her unique humanity. In no way is this admonition designed to lower the status of men. No! Rather it is all about elevating women! In Jesus’ mind and in Jesus’ understanding of God’s realm, everyone is welcomed and invited and embraced as colleagues and coequals, an egalitarian framework that includes everyone while excluding no one.**

In the alternate lection from the Hebrew Bible for today we read the wonderful story of the three divine guests who visit Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18). Like many travelers, they were seeking refuge, relief from the hot sun, with any suitably hospitable accoutrement they could find. They found Abraham, a nomadic herder who was on a journey to a place that God would eventually show him.

They stop to rest a while, to kick up their feet and take a load off and enjoy the expected and fulfilled gifts demanded by the codes and covenants inherently practiced in ancient Near Eastern hospitality, a customary obligation afforded them by their surprise host. In this story, as they approach, Abraham runs to greet them and begins the process of affording them a meal, a bath for their tired feet, and any and everything else that would make their sojourn so much better. Of course, at one point early in the story, Abraham barks out orders to his servants and to his wife, Sarah, to do the deeds that need doing. Abraham does not lift a finger because he has people, people who do this and people who do that and people who do any and everything, including his subservient wife, no exception, no exemption! Ah, what a life! Good if you can get it! It's good to be the man! Surely those magical, mystical, lectionary editors wanted on this liturgical day to present a stark contrast between the traditional role of women at play in the Abrahamic text and the radical scenario being played out in the Gospel story of Mary and Martha and Lazarus and Jesus! The difference is striking in every conceivable way. **What we see in Jesus' actions, and in the actions of his number one disciple Mary, was an immense evolution, a radical, seismic shift, a tsunami of biblical, theological, and societal proportions. Think of it as a last stand, a line in the sand! It was no small thing, then or now! And it is up to each and every one of us as followers of Jesus to continue the march to what should have never been and is not now a different drumbeat. Keep on trending! It is up to all of us to carry this specific cross, to carry the torch with our subtle and sometimes not so subtle protestations, until all are embraced and included in every way with no questions asked, no qualifications, no equivocations, no ifs, ands, or buts, "No matter who they are or where they are on life's journey!" This is no time for a hesitatingly, halting, timidity! Bring it on! Bringing this holy tableau of gospel proportions to fruition would mean the realization, the fulfillment, of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom where the lamb and the lion lay down together and children play over the den of snakes and**

are not bitten or harmed in any way. It would mean the fulfilling of Paul's divinely theological understanding, the better, yes best, parts of his disconnected, disjointed, dichotomous, interpretation of the gospel, affirming that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, insert your favorite polarity of person here and you get the drift. It is a rather simple paradigm unfortunately fraught with a rather difficult process and solution. I am always amazed at the way Paul can shift on the fly and change his tune! The man can literally write out of both sides of his oft conflicted mouth!

As I close today, there is one other theme lurking in this wonderful short story the lectionary gurus have chosen for our reading this morning. It is the reminder that life is all about what the Chinese call yin and yang, finding balance, a healthy equilibrium. We cannot always be activists as was the case with Martha. We cannot always be contemplative and reflective as was the case with Mary. Yes, this too is a place for everyone! Part of being healthy individuals who are a part of healthy systems, in our case as a congregation committed to becoming and being beloved faith community, a communal exercise and enterprise of divine proportions, finding a holistic approach to our personal and corporate emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health, the intuitive, internal, dynamic of having the wisdom to know when to be when, when to be active and productive and when to stop and smell the coffee, smell the roses, to cease and desist, and simply pause and give oneself a much needed Sabbath. My hunch is that this is perhaps the biggest challenge facing our lives. Mary knew when! Martha knew not when! Yes, we all want and need to eat, but sometimes food and its preparation need to wait! It will be there when the good stuff, the God stuff, the Jesus stuff, finds a resting place, allowing proverbial bread and wine, manna in its many delicious forms! No one can determine your pathway. Everyone must figure out these logistical lifestyle calisthenics for themselves. My hope as your pastor is that not only will I remind you that you have permission to take breaks

as needed, but that I will enable and encourage you in finding the perspective in your being and doing that suits you best. **And on a final note, the healthiest people I meet, the healthiest churches I encounter, all have found the sweet spot somewhere balanced in the middle, finding an equilibrium to life and living that emboldens and empowers them to become the best they can be, to live life to its fullest possibility and potential in all their being and doing! We need Marys! We need Marthas! And yes, we need Lazarus too, though not necessarily in this sermon or story! And we need each one of us to be both and sometimes all at the same time! Yes, as with so many of life's serendipitous mysteries wrapped in much enigma, life is usually both/and, not either/or!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and has prepared a place for all of us, making sure we all know our place!
Amen and amen!**

