

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

July 20, 2025

Year C, Proper 11, Revised Common Lectionary

[Genesis 18:1-10a](#)

[Psalm 15](#)

[Colossians 1:15-28](#)

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

+ + +

I have a beloved icon that's traveled with me for more than twenty years, since I bought it at a cathedral shop in Moscow, Russia. It's a small reproduction of the famous icon of the Holy Trinity painted in the 16th century by Andrei Rublyov. I mentioned this icon on Trinity Sunday, and there's a little picture of it in today's bulletin insert, because of course it portrays the story from Genesis we heard today, when Sarah and Abraham receive a divine visitation in the mysterious form of three men.

Now when Rublyov was working, the image of the Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah was already a standard icon. But he chose to do something that's pretty rare in iconography, and that perhaps only a master like he could accomplish; he departed from the standard. He deleted Abraham and Sarah from the scene, making it less an image of an episode from the Bible and more a symbolic image of the Trinity.

In fact, in much of Orthodoxy this is considered the only permissible depiction of the Trinity. Icons of Christ are fine, because Christ took on flesh and became human, but there's no literal way to depict the other two Persons. So Rublyov's choice to represent them symbolically with the three angels established a new convention.

What I find most appealing about this icon is the way it creates a balance of repose and activity. In the black-and-white printed insert of course we can't see the shimmering colors of the original, but we can see the shapes and lines. The three figures are still and calm—yet the sinuous curving lines of the image draw the viewer's eye onward from one to the next in a kind of circular motion. It suggests both God's peace and God's dynamism, and it echoes the way the life of the Trinity is sometimes described as a kind of dance, an interweaving, ongoing movement of mutual delight, eternal and timeless and yet also constantly bursting with life.

There's a similar dynamic in today's Gospel reading, where Jesus gently refuses to let Martha attack Mary. I think it's fitting that our schedule of readings puts these stories together—they're both stories of hospitality and of sitting in the presence of God. As Mary sits at Jesus' feet, she is engaged in something radical and countercultural: a woman sitting in the classic pose of a disciple, a woman engaged in deep learning from the Teacher, a woman treated as a peer of the male disciples, a foreshadowing of the radical equality that Jesus brings and that will take centuries to unfold in the life of the church and is still unfolding now. And Jesus refuses to tell Mary to stop, to set aside her ministry and take up that of Martha. But nor does he tell Martha to stop her ministry and become like Mary.

I don't believe this passage is meant to glorify contemplation over action. Action is important; action is necessary. Here in this parish we have a commitment to feeding people who are hungry. We do it every Sunday morning at our Open Table Breakfast. And it doesn't happen by itself. If the dozens of volunteers who keep Sunday Open Table going each week decided to come in here and sit at the feet of Jesus instead of going into Farlander Hall and slicing vegetables, breaking eggs, and dishing up plates, we wouldn't be feeding people. Martha's work of hospitality is what feeds bellies and creates community, and even what makes it possible for Mary to sit at the feet of Jesus. Rather I think Jesus is calling both Mary and Martha to wholeness. And as I said yesterday in my sermon at Bill's ordination in Sacramento, the word "whole" comes from the same root as the word "heal" and the word "holy." Holiness has to do with wholeness; and part of our wholeness as human beings is integrating action and contemplation, movement and stillness, creativity and repose.

We won't all do that in the same way and the balance will look different for different people. Martha may always be gifted for action, but she can also learn to find the simple core of God's presence in the midst of all that activity, to be released from the burnout and resentment and back into the spirit of hospitality and love that caused her to take up those tasks in the first place. As Wendell Berry writes in one of his poems, "Work done in gratitude, kindly and well, is prayer."

Mary may always be drawn to sit at the feet of Jesus, but the formation she receives there will be manifest in her life in the world. Thomas Merton spent decades in silent prayer, study, and writing as a Trappist monk. Only in his later life did he emerge as a powerful voice against racial injustice and for nuclear disarmament and interfaith dialogue—and he did it mostly through his writing while living as a hermit on the grounds of his monastery. Each of us is gifted with a different personality, different gifts and inclinations, and God uses us precisely as who we are.

And I'm drawn back to that image of the dance, the graceful, poised interplay between activity and repose that characterizes the relationship between the members of the Trinity. And I think that's the invitation for us: to join that holy dance with the particular rhythm and style God has created each of us for; to serve like Martha with generosity, to listen like Mary with wonder, to find the heart of Christ in stillness and in motion, drawing us always deeper into a life of holiness and wholeness.