Last week, we learned about the Good Samaritan. This week, we hear the story of Mary and Martha. Much of the meaning of today’s Gospel lesson comes from the relationship between these two stories. Just a brief reminder, the story of the Good Samaritan is about a man beaten by robbers and left for dead at the side of the road. A priest walks by and does nothing. A Levite, an assistant to the priests in the Temple, walks by and does nothing. But, the Samaritan, the one who is marginalized in society, he stops and aids the victim. Today, in our story of Mary and Martha, Martha is scolded for being distracted by her work, but Mary is praised for listening to God’s Word. The Good Samaritan exemplifies seeing, seeing the man in need, and Mary exemplifies hearing. Together, they are model disciples: those who hear the word of God and do it. From Luke, chapter 8 (vs. 20-21), when Jesus is told that his mother and brothers want to see him, Jesus says, “My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

Let’s explore the story of Mary and Martha a bit further by first recalling the Parable of the Sower. This parable, also in Luke, chapter 8 (5-8), informs our Gospel passage this morning: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” Martha doesn’t make it to the good soil – Martha is stuck in the thorns. She doesn’t hear, she is not receiving, not assimilating the word of God, because she is preoccupied with secondary matters. Mary, on the other hand, is listening with her whole heart and soul. Her love of God is taking precedence over other concerns.

A message coming from these complementary stories of the Good Samaritan and Mary
and Martha, a message that we shouldn’t overlook, is that both the Samaritan and Mary, the heroes of their story, are marginalized persons. Samaritans were considered unclean. They were descendants of mixed marriages, which was unacceptable to the Jews. There was longstanding animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. Mary, as a woman living in a patriarchal culture, was marginalized. In neglecting her duty to prepare the meal and in sitting at the feet of a man, she violated social norms. The heroes are the marginalized. These stories taken together, following one after the other in the Gospel of Luke, are telling us to hear the word of God and do it. Together, these two stories impress upon us “the injustice of social barriers that categorize, restrict, and oppress” (*The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, pgs. 231-232). Jesus is urging us to hear the word of God and do it, to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as our self, to love the other as our self.

We’ve heard this message before! How do we reflect on this message to hear God’s word and love our neighbor as ourselves? How do we reflect on this message this morning so that it might impact our lives? I’ve been thinking about how we get a tugging on our conscious that there is something we should be doing. Sometimes it’s subtle, but it’s there holding on, nudging us to act, and sometimes, it’s all too easy to dismiss. Sometimes we act, sometimes we ignore.

I recall a time when I did act on that nudge. While I was in seminary, a group of us cooked and served breakfast at a transitional shelter on Saturday mornings. I must have gotten up quite early to get there, because I remember that the people who had stayed in the shelter overnight were required to get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, and be out of the building by, I believe, 8:00 am. My schedule was quite full. I was raising my two young children, caring for our home, going to seminary classes, doing homework, participating in the life of the seminary, worship and events and committees. I really could have used a little more sleep on Saturday morning. But, I said “yes” to that tugging on my conscious. Here’s the thing, though in looking
back, I realize I must have had to get up quite early, I don’t remember at what time - that’s not what I remember about the experience. What I remember are the conversations I had with the residents. I learned so much. I came to realize that there is a fine line between those who are making it in life and those who are not – between having access to quality education and not having access to quality education, between being employed and being unemployed, between sleeping in a home and sleeping in a car or on the street – a fine line. I came to realize that the circumstances of life might work in your favor and they might work against you. I came to realize that luck is part of the equation and that true community is the answer. The foundation of our faith, the priority of our lives to love our neighbor as our self urges us to share our resources and ourselves with one another.

I recall another time when I ignored that nudge. The Night Ministry is a Chicago-based organization that works to provide housing, health care and human connection to people struggling with poverty or homelessness. Among other services, this organization has a Health Outreach Bus. Parishioners from local churches volunteer to go into the city at night to build connections and to serve meals to the adults seeking assistance from the Outreach Bus. These volunteers offer a lifeline to forgotten members of the community. I had several opportunities to participate in this program. I thought about it, I had the time, the nudge was there, but I found reasons, excuses, not to participate. In hindsight, I should have said, “Yes.” It’s a lost opportunity to serve and to learn and to be true community.

The stories of the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha are inviting us to pay attention to that nudge, to that tugging on our conscious. May we learn to listen. May we live from a perspective of abundance versus scarcity and prioritize our lives accordingly. How do we measure achievement in life? By hearing the word of God and doing it. Amen.