

July 18, 2010

Sermon      Luke 10:38-42      “The Better Part”

Last week we heard the story of the Good Samaritan, which was sparked by the question of a lawyer, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ Jesus proceeded to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan, a radical story about serving others and being served in response to loving your neighbor. What follows in the gospel of Luke is an instance where Jesus stays with the sisters Mary and Martha, and addresses the first part of the greatest commandments. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.” It addresses hearing the Word rather than seeing need like the Good Samaritan. Listen for the word of God from Luke 10:38-42.

*Now as they went on their way, (Jesus) entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”*

As I listen to this story, I can’t help to think how much I’d hate to be in Martha’s situation. I’m not the best hostess, now if I get everything done before people get to my place, I love it, but if I’m in the kitchen while everybody else is conversing in my living room, I get antsy. I want to be part of the group, not cooking potatoes and rice over a hot stove! And don’t get me started on dishes, anybody who has ever been to my apartment knows that I hate doing dishes. I physically react to doing them, my eyes

water, my nose runs, I start thinking about all the other people in the world who could have done my dishes and start to get angry at who knows who, maybe just the universe for making dishes, and by the time I'm done there's no sense of accomplishment, just frustration. When people tell me doing dishes is relaxing to them, I give them a confused look, because it's the opposite of relaxing to me. Why would I choose to have my fingers get all wrinkly and my eyes watery over spending time with my friends after dinner? Now, I wonder if that is how Martha felt that day, if her pleading with Mary to come help her was so she could have more time with Jesus once the tasks were complete, that she was getting aggravated as she was standing by the hot fire, boiling water for rice, cooking pita bread. When Jesus said that Mary chose the better part, it was an obvious statement because she hated being stuck making dinner. She was distracted by the tasks of cooking and cleaning, but desired to be where Mary was, sitting, listening to Jesus.

My mom on the other hand, loves to be in the kitchen during parties and dinners. It takes a lot of coaxing to get her out, to stop worrying about everybody's drinks or burning the casserole or if the table looks perfect or everybody has a napkin, while everybody else is in the living room talking and having a good time, she is the one making sure that everyone is having a good time, that everything is perfect for everybody. She gets distracted by making it perfect for her guests rather than being with her guests. This could also be the case for Martha, she wanted it to be perfect for Jesus because she respected him so much. She wanted the best meal for him, the best table settings, the best drinks, so when he surprised her with a visit, she put that all together for him to honor him, rather than spending time with him. She wanted Mary's

help to make it even better, to help her with the tremendous tasks she put before herself, but chose the wrong task.

Now I feel like most of us fit into the role of Martha, whether we want to be or not. Whether we want everything to be perfect for others around us, or we would much rather be spending time with people, we are forced to stay busy to get by in the modern world. Even when we're not busy, we're so used to noise and action, that we watch TV or listen to music, play on Facebook or text friends rather than sit still and be quiet. But as Christians we are called to both serve and hear the Word, so just as Mary chose not to help in the kitchen and listen to Jesus speak, we are called to step out of the world and read the Word so that we can serve. A couple weeks ago, I went with the youth and Jonathan and Rusty on a mission trip to Atlanta. While it was ridiculously hot all the time, we did some wonderful service, whether it was with a homeless shelter in downtown Atlanta, a co-op run by a church near Grant Park, or a furniture bank, we met some wonderful and challenging people and served God and those in need. In each of these places, the kids worked hard, lifting heavy things, painting bathroom walls, or playing with kids who needed a lot of attention. Now, we went with an organization called YouthWorks, and they had programming each day before and after our mission projects. We explored the city at night, went to centennial park, Martin Luther King historical site, a huge church in Marietta, and a picnic in Grant park and afterward we had club, where we sang songs, had a little scripture and thanked God for all the people we met and things we did that day. Though, what seemed to be the hardest for many of the kids to participate in were the morning devotionals, where they gave us a booklet with scripture and prayer ideas in it and told us to just spend 15 minutes in prayer and

devotion. This seemed to become for many of the kids, a time for a nap, or a time to talk to each other, rather than a time spent with God. Why was this so hard? When they were so willing to serve others each day, why did silence for 15 minutes make people so uncomfortable? Why does it make any of us so uncomfortable?

Jesus told Martha that Mary chose the better part, which will not be taken away from her. But, both of these women acted as disciples. Martha was worrying with many tasks, which is literally in Greek, “much service.” The Greek of many tasks and much service is used elsewhere in the gospel of Luke to describe discipleship. Mary was also acting as a disciple, sitting at Jesus’ feet, a phrase that is also used in both Luke and Acts to describe disciples. Disciples of any teacher would sit at their feet to hear their teachings, but what was so scandalous about Mary was that she was a woman! The socially acceptable role for women was what Martha was doing in the kitchen, not to engage in conversation with a superior man. So this could be part of Martha’s concern, she was already worried about how it would look for Jesus to enter a house of women, but for Mary to sit with the other disciples at Jesus’ feet would hurt both her and Jesus’ reputation. Jesus, in his true character, flipped around social standards and affirmed Mary’s hearing and scolded Martha’s anxiety over the situation. It is not so much the service itself he is upset with, but her worry and anxiety over it. He even laments it, saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted over many things.” Saying her name twice is reminiscent of the lament Psalms, where the Psalmist cried out to God for help in a tough situation, such as “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus is lamenting for Martha’s situation, that she’s stuck in a role that causes so much

---

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 22:1

anxiety and worry. He's lamenting her worry and anxiety and wishing she would choose the part that Mary has chosen, the more socially unacceptable part, but the part that allows her to listen to him.

Now I read somewhere that, "If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect."<sup>2</sup> It seems that in order to serve God, we must know why, we must read the Scriptures, hear Jesus' word, his preference for the unloved and the marginalized. This is why YouthWorks encouraged devotionals in the morning, so that throughout the day we'd be reminded of who we're serving. Some of the most generous and service oriented people we can think of, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Bishop Oscar Romero, served because they knew scripture, they knew the word of God. In order to serve God, we must know who we're serving and why, and then our anxieties may slip away.

After living in Scotland, visiting the island of Iona and taking a Celtic Christianity class, I'm drawn to the prayers and hymns of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. In the mid 1800s, a man from the Island of Lismore travelled around the highlands collecting prayers and hymns that had been passed down through generations to the quaint and overworked families. These prayers were placed in the *Garmina Gadelica*, and show the ability for the people in the gaelic culture to pray as they work, pray as they travel, and pray as they pilgrimage. It contains some funny blessings, such as one for milking a cow,

*"Bless, O God, my little cow,*

---

<sup>2</sup> Craddock, Fred.

*Bless, O God, my Desire;  
 Bless Thou my partnership  
 And the milking of my hands, O God<sup>3</sup>*  
 Or when churning butter

*“Come, thou Mary Mother mild,  
 hasten the butter on the cream;  
 Seest thou Paul and John and Jesus  
 Waiting the gracious butter yonder.<sup>4</sup>”*

But some are just beautiful such as this journey blessing,

*“Bless to me, O God,  
 The earth beneath my foot,  
 Bless to me, O God,  
 The path whereon I go;  
 Bless to me, O God,  
 The thing of my desire;  
 Thou Evermore of evermore,  
 Bless Thou to me my rest.<sup>5</sup>”*

What seems important about these blessings, is that while the people were working like Martha, they were blessing their work as they went, continuing a conversation with God as they were serving others or going about their many and dangerous tasks. We had the exercise in my Celtic Christianity class to write our own blessings for our daily tasks. To turn this ancient practice into a modern one, I wrote a couple for my day to day life:

*“Bless O God this car,  
 May the engine start as I turn the key,*

---

<sup>3</sup> *Garmina Gadelica*, 344

<sup>4</sup> *Garmina Gadelica*, 352

<sup>5</sup> *Garmina Gadelica*, 271

*May it run smoothly and without check engine lights or brake failure lights on the dashboard*

*May it keep me and those inside safe,*

*Bless the folks it carries to serve you,*

*and may we arrive at our destination to continue your work.”*

This was a blessing my car called Bob could have used this week as it continued to break down. I wrote others for when I start up my laptop, to pray while brushing my teeth, while washing my face. Little reminders that God is with me through the mundane things of each day. Another possibility is to keep scripture in mind throughout the day, as a teenager I had “You are fearfully and wonderfully made,” from Psalm 139 written on my mirror to remind me each day where I came from. Kneading bread can be a spiritual practice, the rhythm of kneading as the meter of a prayer, blessing, or scripture passage. Maybe I need to think of a prayer while I’m washing dishes, and I won’t continue to be so aggravated. So, while Martha did not choose the “better part,” she did not choose a bad part, she just got carried away with selfish worry, whether out of jealousy, out of desire for perfection, out of worry for her sister’s status, or not being able to be still and listen, this became more important than the commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.

Now I can’t tell an active church to stop doing many tasks, otherwise we wouldn’t have things like VBS, lemonade on the lawn, potlucks, Sunday school, or any of the important things we do in the church. Instead I ask you to take a breather, refresh with the words of Christ, be reminded who you belong to, bless the situation you are in and then serve without anxiety and worry. We are called to be disciples, and we need

to be a little bit of both kinds, Mary and Martha, or Mary and the Samaritan, but in order to be the Samaritan we must also be Mary, recognizing Christ in the mundane, so as we serve the church and others we remember who we're doing it for, so that in humility we reveal and recognize the hospitality of Christ. Let us take some time now for some silent meditation.