

The Better Part

Psalm 33

Luke 10:38-42

I've heard many excuses for why people don't embrace Christianity. One of the most prevalent is that the Bible is confusing and contradictory. And indeed we're confronted by that today. Because from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has been teaching and encouraging people to act boldly and decisively on their faith. He says: "Who are my mother and my brothers? Those who hear the word of God and do it (8:21)". And Jesus has just come from discussing with a lawyer the formula to inherit eternal life. Do you remember that conversation? "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the lawyer asks. But he knows the answer. Do you? What does he say? He says: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself." Correct! And then to illustrate exactly what this kind of love looks like, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan—the story of sacrificial participation, faith in action! And then he says to the lawyer.... "Go and do likewise (10:37)." Go and do likewise. Enact your faith, help your neighbor, be a participant in the Kingdom of God. Go and Do.

He goes straight from that conversation to his friends Martha and Mary and he sits down in the living room and says to Martha who is all squawked out about providing hospitality ... he says to her: "Sit and listen."

So there it is! The biblical contradiction! Go and Do? Or Sit and Listen? What's it to be?

Please pray with me: Lord, we come this morning from a busy world that claims our attention and our efforts. Quiet us enough that we may sit at your feet and listen. Open our hearts for the better part. Make us your people. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and Redeemer.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Itinerant teacher, wandering preacher, he stops in at his friends Martha and Mary's house and he is looking for a meal and place to rest.

Martha is doing what all good hosts do: she is flying about from the well for the water to the oven for the bread to the frying pan to flip the fish. She is wiping the dust from the cups and plates and setting the table. And her sister - well, where is her sister? She should be in the kitchen, helping, shouldn't she? I think her sister's name should be Barbie—that's my sister's name--because whenever it came time to work in the kitchen in our house, Barbie was nowhere to be found either.

But no, her sister's name is Mary and Mary is doing something very unusual. She is sitting at the feet of Jesus - the traditional posture for a student or a disciple - and she's oblivious to the chores and labors of Martha, she is listening intently to what Jesus has to say.

I love these Biblical images that capture so beautifully for us insight into the truth of our human nature. For it seems very natural and true to me that Martha would walk into the living room and say, Hey! I'm working my bleep off here all by myself! Jesus, make Mary help me out! It's unfair and it's not right and I...uh.. well... you know... I ... hunh...

I've been in Martha's shoes—haven't you? This seems a reasonable reaction to me. I mean, when it comes to hospitality—someone has to peel the potatoes and wash the dishes, don't they? Someone has to make the coffee and set out the donut holes in Heritage Hall. Someone has to feed the lunches to the homeless folks at the Baldwin Center today. Someone has to take care of and provide for and bandage and build and help and hold and care... After all, we know well that we are not called to some abstract, feel-good spirituality.

We worship God made flesh and dwelling among us, touching and healing and teaching and feeding, don't we? Laundering the sheets for SOS, or digging trenches in Appalachia, or spreading cheese whiz on crackers for VBS, or praying with AIDS patients at a medical clinic in South Africa...that's what our faith is all about, is it not? Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and yes, your neighbor as yourself. Go and Do.

But as always, when we invite Jesus into our lives, he has the audacity to upset our expectations and overturn the status quo. So Jesus answers: "Martha, Martha. You are anxious and distracted by many things. But there is need of only one thing. Your sister Mary has chosen the better part (10:41-42).

Hmph! The better part. I think that's about when I'd wipe my hands and take off my apron and send out for pizza.

What in the world is Jesus saying to us today? Are all of those things not important? Are we not supposed to be working devotedly for God's reign? Is Jesus saying stop doing those things and just sit and listen, contemplate your spirituality? I don't think so. I do think maybe, the key can be found in this little word "distracted," which in the Greek literally means "pulled around in many directions"....I think that helps us get underneath Jesus' words and begin to understand why we most desperately need to hear them. Because, for the most part, I think we too are distracted by many things—yes even sometimes our ministries of service—pulled in many directions. I wonder if when Jesus said these words somehow he understood that here we would be, two millennia later, victimized as we are, by the "tyranny of the urgent."

It's endemic. I'm convinced that the worst four-letter word in our vocabulary these days is "busy." "I'm so busy." It's the mantra of our times. As we are over-extended employees stretched to 60 hour work weeks or more for demanding employers; we are attentive parents shuttling our children between school and sports and play dates. And then there are doctor appointments and grocery shopping and household chores and volunteering at school and heavens-to-Betsy yes, church too, of course.

Yes, for many of us, we approach our Christian mandate to Go and Do with the same sense of urgency and harriedness as poor Martha stuck in the kitchen. We are all tempted to understand our discipleship as first of all an activity of our will—we understand that our obedience to the Word of God is vital and so it is! Faith without works is dead, as James said. And while showing our love for God and neighbor by participating—by making the coffee, or working VBS, or serving at the soup kitchen, or rebuilding in Pearlington—while all of these are essential ways of enacting our faith, if we try to do them without first spending time at the feet of Jesus, without first listening for the direction given us in the Word, without being formed and transformed together here into community—the Body of Christ—if we throw ourselves into all this busyness without first grounding ourselves in God... well, then we tend to flame out like a comet, pour ourselves dry, and find ourselves sometimes resentful of our call to worship here on a Sunday morning as an invasion of the one day of the week when we can sleep in, attend our kids' soccer practice, or have brunch with our family.

And from there it's just a slippery slope until we discover that our faith has been sanitized of the amazing grace of God's initiating salvation for us, and replaced by a social ethic that makes us responsible to work our own salvation. I think this is illustrated well by a story preacher Tom Long tells¹ about when he served as part of an advisory group to the chaplains at a major university. His job was to meet with and hear reports from the university chaplains about their work, and to offer support and counsel. One day a council member asked the chaplains, "What are the university students like morally these days?"

The chaplains looked at each other, wondering how to answer that question. Finally one of them took a stab at it. 'Well,' she said, 'I think you'd be pleased. The students are pretty ambitious in terms of their careers, but that's not all they are. A lot of them tutor kids after school. Some work in a night shelter and in a soup kitchen for the homeless. Last week a group of students protested apartheid in South Africa.....' As she talked, the Jewish chaplain who was listening to her began to grin. Finally his grin became so distracting, she asked 'Am I saying something funny?' 'No, no, I'm sorry,' he said. 'I was just sitting here thinking. You are saying that the university students are good people, and you're right. And you're saying that they are involved in good social causes, and they are. But what I was thinking is that the one thing they lack is a vision of salvation.' Everyone all looked at the Jewish chaplain. 'No, it's true,' he said. 'If you do not have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can't get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down.' If you don't have some vision of what God is doing in the world, it will finally beat you down." We can't go out into the world to serve, until, like Mary, we have spent time at the feet of Jesus, until we too have feasted on the better part.

Over these last six weeks, a small group of us have gathered together on Monday mornings to share in a time of spiritual growth and discovery. And one of the main discoveries we shared was that we understand that God calls us, each one of us individually and all of us together, to be the presence of Christ to those we meet in the world. What we discovered is that this is an impossible calling unless we have spent time in the presence of Christ ourselves.

So this is why you need to come here on a Sunday morning. I realize, of course, that I am preaching to the choir. You are here. But on those days when you too wrestle—as do I sometimes!—with the longing to sleep in, to play golf, to drink coffee and read the paper, please remember that this is where you and I come to sit at the feet of Jesus. This is where we come put away our busyness, take off our aprons, and sit to hear the voice that challenges our expectations and revolutionizes our lives. This is where we come to say yes to God and to each another. This is where we discover that indeed, although we live in the world, we are not of the world. We come to learn the language of faith, which is a startling and necessary alternative to the language of our society today.

And what is that language of faith? Well first and foremost, it is worship - we lift our hearts and lives in praise to our Creator. We bow with awe and trembling as we remember our finite human nature and we confess our sinfulness. And we remember again and again that it is by God's grace, by Christ's blood that we are saved. This is where we come with the first fruits of our labors—our tithes and offerings—to vanquish the idolatry of material things and to state to ourselves and to the world that we and all that we have is God's.

And this is where we come to hear the Word, and thus gain the vision with which to see the world as a place where God is at work, calling us, equipping us and yes, sending us out again to participate with God in the even now in-breaking of God's New Creation. Worship, my friends, is not an option, but an imperative - for we are created to worship God, who claims us and names us, forms us and transforms into the people God needs us to be.

So come. Take off your apron. Set aside your distracted busyness. Choose the better part and come and worship. Remember who you are and whose you are. Sit at the feet of Jesus and listen. And then... and only then... in faithfulness and humility... in Christ-centered love and joy.... Go and Do.

¹Tom Long, "*Mary and Martha*", Day 1. July 22.2007.