

“What Is Really Important?”

Luke 10: 38-42

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We live in a world that seems to equate busyness with importance. A long “things to do today” list, especially when it’s finally completed, gives us a sense of satisfaction and even security...at least, until we start on tomorrow’s new list of tasks to be completed. Our days are full of many things, and our minds are full and overflowing, worried and distracted. Henri Nouwen once wrote that our lives, while full, are often unfulfilled. “Our occupations and preoccupations,” he said, “fill our external and internal lives to the brim. They prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives.”

Last Sunday we reflected on Jesus’ well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. We who follow the Revised Common Lectionary heard Jesus’ teaching that eternal life is caught up in the serving of our neighbor in need. Then comes this Mary-Martha story, following right on the heels of the “Good Samaritan” in the tenth chapter of Luke’s gospel. In this story Martha appears to be doing the right thing by serving her neighbor, in this case, Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, is just sitting and listening.

The question I am posing today is this: In this situation what was really important? What should have been the priority? For the longest time I would have been inclined to say: “The Mary answer seems the better one.” Surely the nurturing of my faith is “the better part?” “Don’t chastise me,” I would have said, “about not doing my ‘Christian duty’ to brother or sister. I am sitting at the feet of Jesus. I am learning from my Lord.”

You are right to point out to me that Jesus commends Mary’s response to his presence in their home. Jesus said that Mary had chosen “the better part.” It was like Jesus telling Martha that he thought he was going to enjoy her company, as well as Mary’s ...like Jesus was saying: “Martha, today it’s all about being, not doing ...about being friends, attentive listeners ...about being prepared to share our presence with one another, and being prepared to personally care. So Mary is on target today; she has figured out what is important.” And, indeed, there are times when Jesus must simply want us to be with him.

Can you imagine what life would be like, even for a little while, without all of the things that keep us busy ...keep us doing stuff? Can you imagine time for our internal lives, hours spent in being with God, abiding with God, in tending our relationship with God, listening to the quiet still voice of God speaking to us, deep within our hearts? How can the God who often speaks in a still small voice get a word in edgewise over the beepers, pagers, cell phones, i-phones, blackberries, voicemail, television, i-pods, and radio messages that bombard us? It seems that Jesus has chosen most unlikely teachers to set us right: one a hated Samaritan and the other a lowly woman to teach us that being and doing go together. The point of the two stories in such close proximity to each other is that it's not being *or* doing, it's being with God *and* doing for God that make us faithful disciples.

So, before we too readily accept the more common interpretation that Jesus was commending Mary and rebuking Martha, we better look closer. The interpretation is not as clear-cut as it at first sight appears. I don't think that Jesus was writing off Martha's activity in favor of Mary's passivity; he simply stressed that at the time – and in that specific context – Martha's kitchen chores were less important than sharing company with him like Mary. The story is all about choices. Remember he says to Martha, "You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part." Nowhere do I find Jesus saying, "What you have chosen, Martha, is unimportant." Rather, he is saying, "Right now, you've got the wrong priority. We're here to spend time visiting with one another. Come, sit down, and relax. I'll help with the dishes later!"

The point of this story is not about diminishing the importance of Martha's busyness and romanticizing the importance of Mary's reflectiveness. The point is not to turn Martha into a cartoon, showing her up to her elbows in soapsuds, while Mary sits in rapt attention on a stool in the den. If we're not careful, we might reach the conclusion that Jesus came to justify nothing more profound than letting the dishes pile up high in the sink, and then arrive at an ethic of inactivity. And there's a real danger in that position. Fred Craddock warns, "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. Knowing which and when is a matter of *spiritual discernment*."

So what is really important in the Martha and Mary situation? My answer is not to elevate doing or being, activity or passivity, but to ask God to help us to *discern* the timing of our doing or being. There is never enough time to do everything that we want to do. It is *discernment*, rather than time, that I think is the key to this text. We have to ask ourselves, “When is it important to *do* something with and for Jesus Christ, and when is it important just to *be there* with and for Jesus Christ?” The one thing that Martha needed more acutely than more time ...always more time ...was the ability to *discern* what was important in the allotted time.

I recall a time in my ministry, a little over twenty years ago, when I was doing more in the time allotted to my job than was either expected of me or healthy for me. I was up to my elbows in the soapsuds of a consulting ministry in the Missionary Department of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. The beauty of it was that I was really enjoying being so busy and my ministry was growing in influence in our denomination. I traveled extensively as a Conference consultant. A book that I co-edited was published after I had initiated and executed an ecumenical and national conference on the theme of contextual church growth in South Africa. I was feeling fulfilled by the growing recognition of our Missionary Department, and my own place in it. However, the danger was that I was letting my spiritual life slip away. I just was not spending enough time in reflection, meditation and nurturing my spirit in the presence of Jesus Christ on a regular basis.

Something unusual happened to sort me out. I attended a retreat for ministers on “Dreams and Dream Interpretation.” It was conducted by the world-renowned Christian author and teacher, Morton Kelsey. During this retreat I had a dream one night. It was so vivid. In it I found myself sitting in the garden at the back of our home. It was a place where I often grilled outdoors – a place where I rarely just sat. It was another busy place for me. But here I was in the dream just sitting in a garden chair, and Jesus entered the garden and came up to me, greeted me, and sat down. I remember my feelings clearly. I was overawed by Jesus’ presence, but also delighted that he was there. I immediately sprang to my feet, like Martha would have done, and suggested that I go inside and make us a cup of tea. I was just trying to do the correct hospitable thing. Jesus motioned to me to sit down again, and told me that this was not a time to make tea but simply to enjoy each other’s company. “I have missed your company,” Jesus

told me, “and I thought we could just be here together in the garden for a while. It will feel so good just being together doing nothing.”

I awoke from that dream, and from that time I pledged to be more attentive to discerning the balance between my inward journey of prayer and devotion with Jesus Christ, and my outward journey of service and ministry with and for Jesus Christ. It is a difficult lesson that I continue to struggle with, but it is one that we must all learn in order to maintain a balance between Martha and Mary experiences. You see, in my opinion, both are important, but *when* one is a priority over the other is the concern of this gospel story. That was what Martha had to learn. It is also what I have continued in subsequent years to learn, and possibly you, too.

The Christian journey is all about our response to the Kingdom of God in our midst – a journey that is both inward and outward – a journey balanced by both passive and active responses to Christ’s presence in our world. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” A passive response is to the Kingdom within us. Jesus also said, “The Kingdom of God is among you.” An active response is to recognize and become involved through Christ-like living and loving when the Kingdom manifests itself through those in need around us. Your job and mine is to discern what response is important at any given time: inward or outward, passive or active, being or doing. Sometimes what matters most is an active response – like that of the Good Samaritan who, in the presence of one in need, recognizes the moment in which the Kingdom of God is breaking into his life, and responds by going and doing. Sometimes, what matters most is the contemplative response – to do what Mary did in this story – to step away from the routines of life and to be, rather than to do. One response is not better or more important than the other. It is all about the ability to discern what to do in each moment.

Paul Tillich talks about what is “ultimately important” in our daily lives. Figuring that out and putting that first is the challenge of today’s Gospel lesson. So be watchful for the ways that the Kingdom, even now, is manifesting itself around you and within you. Stay alert to how it may be drawing near to you, in the form, perhaps, of some person in need this week – someone you might meet in a chance encounter. Or of some mighty injustice that has gripped your attention and begs for your energy and passion. Or of some spiritual awakening that has put you in touch with a beating heart that you had forgotten you had. Or of something of beauty that reminds you that the world is more, for sure, than just collective ugliness. Having

discerned the presence of the Kingdom of God that is ever drawing near to us, the rest is easy. We'll know what to do next – only one thing. “There is need of only one thing,” Jesus said. One thing! God, give us discernment and help us to focus on the one thing needed for our salvation and for the salvation of others.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.