

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
July 18, 2010
Luke 10: 38-42
Mary and Martha

A farm boy accidentally overturned his wagon load of wheat on the road. The farmer who lived nearby came to investigate. ‘Hey, Willis”, he called out. “Forget your troubles for a while and come have dinner with us. Then I’ll help you with your wagon”. “That’s very nice of you”, Willis answered, ‘but I don’t think Dad would like me to”. “Aw, come on, son!” the farmer insisted. “Well, okay’, the boy finally agreed, “but Dad won’t like it”. After a hearty dinner, Willis thanked the host. “I feel a lot better now, but I know Dad’s going to be real upset”. “Don’t be silly!” said the neighbor. “By the way, where is he!” Willis replied, “Under the wagon”.

As we know from the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes, there is a time for every matter under heaven. A season for everything. A time to be born. A time to die. A time for breaking down and a time building up. A time for weeping. A time for laughing. A time for eating. A time for helping Dad get out from under the wagon.

And as we learn from today’s gospel story, a time for serving. A time for sitting. A time for going and doing. A time for listening. A time to be Mary. A time to be Martha.

My sermon title makes this clear. This is not an either/or story. Jesus loves both of these sisters. And Jesus needs both of these sisters. He isn’t telling Martha to become Mary. He isn’t telling Mary she’s better than Martha. He’s reminding them that discipleship involves relationship. Doing the word comes out of hearing the word.

So let’s unpack the story a bit. First – it’s the story of Mary and Martha – and perhaps the order of the names is important. Not because one is more important than the other – but because action follows listening. Listening precedes action. Jesus always said it like this, “be hearers and doers of the word”. He never reversed the order. He never said “be doers and hearers of the word”. Listening always comes first.

What Mary is doing is listening to Jesus. She is taking time to sit with him talk with him, learn from him, and share her life with them. She’s paying attention to Jesus. She’s interacting with him. She’s focusing on Jesus. She’s making time to be with Jesus. She’s in relationship with Jesus. This is how discipleship begins – and what discipleship continues to require. To be still for a bit – and listen to what Jesus is saying. To focus on hearing the word that comes from God through Jesus. For us it means to pray, to read and study the Scripture, to meditate, to be still and pay attention to the voice of God within us, to slow down, to take Sabbath time to rest in God’s presence. Without such listening, our own words will eventually become like a clanging cymbal – all noise, no melody. All sound, no substance. No relationship can be sustained for the long haul without paying attention to it, without giving it some prime time, without listening to the other. Our relationship with God is no exception. And that’s why Mary is commended. Not because she is better than Martha. But because, on this particular day at least, she

has chosen to put her focus on Jesus. She has made a choice to pay attention to Jesus and to listen to him. So that, we have to assume, she can then get up and do what Jesus needs to be done. It's not sitting just for the sake of sitting. It's not sitting to avoid working. It's sitting so that there is strength and vitality and purpose to the work that will follow. It's listening so that when she speaks and when she acts she does it faithfully, she does it with conviction and meaning.

Preaching Professor Thomas Long tells a story about a friend of his who took a youth group on a mission trip to Jamaica. They visited a local elementary school, and spent some time observing a classroom seriously overcrowded with children, most of them very poor, all of them needy and wiggly and noisy and unruly. It was a difficult, sometimes even chaotic learning environment; but the youth group marveled to see that the teacher carried herself with great calm and patience, treating all of the children with love and respect. They decided that the only way she could do this was that she must really love being a teacher. They were surprised, however, to hear her say, "Oh, I don't come here every day mainly because I love teaching. I come here every day because I love Jesus, and I see Jesus in every one of these children". (Thomas Long, "Mary and Martha: Discipleship and Hospitality", www.day1.org).

The teacher knew Jesus. The teacher had spent time sitting at Jesus' feet. And because she had, she could get up and teach those children with love and joy and hope.

So we begin with Mary – again not because she's more important, but because she has chosen the part that's needed first. Relationship with Jesus. Listening. Paying Attention. Learning. The part that Martha also knows, but has gotten distracted from doing.

And that's what Jesus' comment is all about. Not that Martha is serving him. Not that it isn't important to provide hospitality – because it is – but that she has become distracted in her serving. It's become a whirlwind of activity, without substance, without focus. It's like Martha has forgotten who her guest is – she's so focused on what she needs to do, that she has forgotten why she's doing it. Listen again to her complaint in verse 40: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me". In one verse Martha refers to herself three times --- and that's what anxiety and distraction do – they get us so wrapped up in ourselves we lose sight of others –and whatever we're doing becomes more about us than anything else.

Another preacher suggests that in modern terms "it would be as though we're in our Sunday School classes learning about the Bible while Jesus is teaching in the sanctuary. Martha isn't doing anything wrong, but her timing is a little off. She's missing the fact that the Rabbi is right in her living room! And not only that, but she doesn't even realize how comical her complaint to Jesus is: "Can't you see all of his hard work I'm doing to further your mission? I'm leading Bible study tomorrow, I've got a prayer meeting on Thursday, and I'm doing the children's sermon next week! Tell Mary to stop sitting there listening to you teach and make her come help me figure out how to teach others about you!". (Jeff Olive, "Don't Let Worry Kill You – Let the Church Help!", www.goodpreacher.com).

It's Mary's distraction that's the problem, not her action. Of course it's a good thing to feed a hungry and tired Jesus. Of course it's a good thing to provide welcoming hospitality. But don't forget who the object of your focus is. Don't forget your guest. Don't forget why you're doing what you're doing.

Staying busy for the sake of staying busy isn't ministry. Getting a lot accomplished for the sake of getting a lot accomplished isn't discipleship. When we forget why we do what we do, our actions lose their meaning, and it won't take too long for ministry, for serving others, for being active in our faith, to become a drudgery – and for us to just go through the motions. We'll burn out. We'll get cranky. We'll become more concerned with how things are done than why. We'll worry about whether we've done enough things right, rather than whether we are doing the right things. How many of you make lists of things to do – or lists of things that need to be done? Do you put sitting still and listening to Jesus on that list? When you wake up in the night worrying about things, do you worry about whether you have prayed enough or been quiet enough or spent enough time reading and meditating on the Scriptures? Probably not. When we get together for church meetings – how much time do we put on our agendas for prayer and devotion? A few minutes maybe. The rest of the meeting is about getting through an agenda – making sure the items of business are taken care of. How much listening to God do we do?

I read this description in one commentary on today's passage: "A church that has been led to be 'worried and distracted by many things' inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shallows of frantic potlucks, anxious stewardship campaigns, and events designed to perpetuate the institution. Decisions will be made in meetings without a hint of God's reign. Food and drink will appear at the table without Christ being recognized in the breaking of bread. Social issues may be addressed, but the gospel is missed in acts that partake of politics as usual...On the other hand, when a congregation is led to position itself at Christ's feet – reading Scripture together and asking after its meaning, listening to substantive sermons and wrestling like Jacob for God's blessing, studying and nurturing a faith that seeks understanding – then even the details of the common life begin to resound with good news". (Cynthia Jarvis, Pastoral Perspective, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 264).

Luke's story of Jesus with Mary and Martha immediately follows Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. At the end of the parable Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, 'the one who showed him mercy'. Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise'. For the lawyer who wanted to know what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, it was the time to go and do. He knew the Scriptures. He knew what the Lord required. He just needed Jesus' prodding to do it. He needed to put the loving your neighbor part of the great commandment into action – and Jesus widened his understanding of what it means to do that. Martha, however, has become so involved with the going and doing likewise part of Jesus' teaching, she has neglected the sitting and listening. It's been too long since she paid attention to why she was doing what she was doing. The loving God with all her heart and soul and strength had got lost in the midst of all the pots and pans and comings and goings. Martha needed some down time --- Martha needed to

rest. Martha needed to just be with Jesus --- to be in his presence and receive strength and assurance from him.

It's not either/or. It's not even that some of us need to be Marys in the world – sitting and listening to Jesus, while others of us need to be Marthas in the world, going and doing. No --- it's always both/and. The challenge is creating a balance within ourselves. Knowing what time it is, so to speak. Are you worried and distracted? Then maybe it's time for you to sit and listen. Maybe it's time for you to pay attention to Jesus. Maybe it's time for you to re-think everything you're doing and create more time for prayer and quietness. Maybe it's time to pick up your Bible and read it and talk about it with others and learn more about it. Maybe it's time for you to be Mary. Are you becoming too complacent or comfortable? Are you good at putting things off? Are you still waiting for the right time to come along before doing what needs to be done? Then maybe it's time for you to get more involved in putting your faith into action – into serving others, into helping, into providing mercy and hospitality, into giving care and hope to others. Maybe it's time for you to be Martha.

The balance can shift pretty often, you know. We probably all have one direction we tend toward more than the other – and that's okay --- but that doesn't mean we don't need to pay attention to the part that comes less easily or naturally to us. All Marthas need to be Marys every so often. And all Marys need to be Marthas too. And in case you men out there some how think that all this Mary and Martha language is exclusive – or that it doesn't apply to you – I apologize if you think the former and you're mistaken if you think the latter. Substitute Malachi and Micah --- or Marvin and Michael – the point is, of course, that we can't just be one or the other. We are called to be both --- Marys who sit, and Marthas who do. And whether we are sitting or doing, we are to pay attention – and to not become so distracted that we lose sight of what our sitting or our doing is all about. We don't sit at Jesus' feet to avoid responsibility. We don't carry out our responsibilities without thought or purpose. Our focus, either way, is on Jesus – on the one who shows us what it is to love God with all our heart and soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The one, who is, as we sang a bit earlier, to be our best thought by day or by night – the one whose presence is our light.

Are we to be Marthas who, like the Good Samaritan, go and do?
Are we to be Marys, who sit and listen?

The answer is – Yes!

Let us pray: You have taught us, O God, that the way to life is to love you with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But we are often so overwhelmed by the swirling demands of life that we cannot truly do either one. But then, in your mercy, there is Jesus, come to visit in our home, come to speak to us in the midst of life. Let us, like Mary, sit at his feet and listen to his Word that gives life. Then, having heard that Word, let us, like Martha, get up to serve others in Jesus' name. Amen.
(Thomas Long, "Mary and Martha", www.day1.org).