

On choosing the better part...

Sermon 24 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 21, 2019

Luke 10:38-42

A few years ago, I took a group of 55 adults on a pilgrimage through the Deep South. From Charlotte to Atlanta, Tuskegee to Birmingham, Selma and finally to Memphis, we retraced the steps of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and in essence the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. This was the culmination of a year-long education series I'd created, it was the first adult pilgrimage we'd tried, and it's primary goal (other than education) was to create an opportunity for faith-based relationships to take root amongst our predominantly white congregation and the predominantly black congregation with whom we partnered. The trip was jam-packed with stops, tour guides, and educational opportunities... but it was relational at its core.

For three whole days before we left, I dedicated myself to writing a pilgrimage guidebook that would root each participant in shared stories, in scripture, and in song. When everyone loaded the bus, I delighted in watching new friendships form, as people moved from seat to seat, introducing themselves and asking those first questions: "Hi, what's your name? Do you have any kids...?"

I sat up front, behind the bus driver with the itinerary in my hand and my administrative assistant by my side. Together she and I helped make sure we were arriving at our destinations on time, and that everything was on track.

It wasn't until Memphis, on the next to last day of our trip, that I realized what I'd been missing out on the whole time.

It is because of this experience (and a million others like it) that today's reading from Luke's Gospel makes me so uncomfortable. On the surface, the story goes like this: two sisters host an important guest in their home. One sister does the necessary work, the other spends time with the guest. The one working gets upset with the one who is not helping out.

It is easy for us to understand how Martha feels. It sparks the same emotions we might feel when we read the story of the Prodigal Son and completely understand the older brother, the one who stays and does the necessary and right thing while the younger brother lives his life amongst the pigs.

One remarkable thing about this story is that all the action takes place amongst women. We are in the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha welcomes Jesus and the disciples (presumably) into their home. Martha gets to work preparing drink and food as Mary reclines at Jesus' feet and listens. Even though we already know how the story goes, we know that Jesus is going to praise Mary's choice... Martha is the one doing what is expected.

When a guest enters a house, the women get to work in the kitchen. Their role was one of active service.

Mary, however, chooses not to engage in normal behavior. She will not cook, she will not serve her guest, rather, she will sit at his feet and listen. ...with the men.

About half-way through the pilgrimage, after a particularly painful museum experience in Selma, two of the other ministers on the trip interrupted the itinerary and told me that we had to make time for honest conversation and for prayer. All I could think about was how that pause would delay us and put us behind for the rest of the day. We might even miss one of our points of interest due to timing. I looked up from my clipboard and saw the faces of our group members. And when I looked up I finally saw what my colleagues had seen: eyes swollen, red from crying, anger, frustration, loss for words...

I was distracted by so many tasks that I failed to see the people for whom I was working, they were in pain.

Martha does what so many of us do, she does what she's supposed to do, what she is expected to do, she does what somebody needs to do. And because I can identify so easily with Martha, I love the quote from Lutheran Priest, Emmy Kegler, printed as the reflection text in our worship guide today.

...we should be cautious of reading condemnation of what Martha has chosen. Instead, we might step into a two-handed read of the importance of hospitality: both as charity extended toward the stranger but also as space made for the self to sit, learn, and grow. For true discipleship, we need not only an open heart and mind but also open hands to serve the needs of those from whom we learn. Even in the revolution, someone still needs to do the dishes.

This story about the sisters is not an isolated episode in Luke's Gospel. It comes on the heels of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in a section of the Gospel in which Jesus teaches about seeing and hearing. Earlier in the chapter Jesus blesses his disciples for seeing and hearing and then Jesus himself encounters two characters who cannot seem to see or hear. The Lawyer and the distracted sister, Martha.

The lawyer is distracted by his mind, trying to understand the Kingdom of God and wrap his mind around it. What he needs to see and hear is then modeled by the Samaritan: "go and do."

The sister Martha is distracted by all her doing. In fact, she's so aware of what needs to be done that she cannot "sit and listen" like her sister.

The Samaritan and the sisters surprise us and challenge us to see and hear the movement of God and God's call to discipleship which is often beyond our expectations and the opposite of status quo.

Some of us are more prone to action. We see needs in the world and we work hard to make sure those needs are met. Sometimes that looks like local missions, volunteer work, tutoring, construction, serving in the church kitchen or working on church clean-up day. Others of us are better at the stillness of spiritual life: worship, prayer, reading scripture and seeking greater understanding. But the beautiful thing that this Lukan chapter reminds us of is that all are needed AND that each of us will be called to step outside of our comfort zones from time to time.

On the final day of the pilgrimage, as we loaded the bus in Memphis to head for home, I realized I'd spent the whole trip consumed by the details. Where would we stop for lunch, was everybody on the bus, are we ready to go to our next stop...? I'd been so distracted by those tasks that I wasn't present enough to make a new friend. I looked around as we hit the road and noticed the new seating arrangements chosen by new friends, I saw smiles and hands being held as we sang freedom songs and rode home together. I heard testimonies from fellow pilgrims about how a conversation with Tammie or Joyce or Bill or Walter changed their perspective and I couldn't help but notice a tiny bit of jealousy well up within my own self. There in Memphis, as the bus pulled away and all the work was done, I realized the heart of this pilgrimage was playing out, in story, in song, in scripture all around me... because of and in spite of all those necessary tasks.

So, I get it when Martha says to Jesus, "Do you not care?" ... "Tell her to help me."

There is always work to be done and there is always time to stop the work and to tend to our relationships with God and with one another. There will be some of us who are more prone to one or the other. And it seems like what Luke is trying to tell us is that all are needed.

The caution is, if we get too caught up in our favorite activity – be it "going and doing" or "sitting and listening," we risk missing the stranger on the road to Jericho and the guest in our midst.

This little reminder from Luke helps us find balance in our personal and spiritual lives but it also is a word of caution for us as a church. Churches are made up of Lawyers and Samaritans, of Marys and Marthas. Each of us work together to embody the fullness of Christ in our world but we cannot forget that it takes us all.

Here, through the duality of Mary and Martha, Jesus teaches us about the mission of the church and the necessity to keep the two in balance. As the body of Christ in the world we are called to worship and we are called to serve. There are times when our rhythms and expectations will be interrupted and we'll have to adjust.

Who knows what Mary and Martha were up to before Jesus showed up at the door? Maybe there was soup on the stove, maybe it was cleaning day... or maybe it was lazy Saturday. But Jesus interrupts with a knock on the door and both sisters leap into action: Martha prepping the meal and Mary tending to their guest.

Notice, Jesus doesn't actually take sides in the text. By refusing to get involved in this sisterly dynamic, Jesus affirms what Mary is doing – as outrageous as it may be. He affirms that she took her place amongst Jesus' other disciples to listen and learn from him. And, Jesus affirms Martha's work, calling her out only for her distraction and probably the bitterness that was welling up within her toward her sister. Jesus doesn't criticize her from doing the work that needed to be done, he simply refuses to shame Mary for not doing the same thing.

All of us have a little Mary and a little Martha within us. To be spiritually whole we need to make time for listening and for serving. We need to engage in practices of prayer and worship that fill our souls and expand our understanding of who God is and how God is working in our lives. And we need to share what we have with others. We need to go and do, working to know our neighbors and love them like we love ourselves. We've got to be more like Mary; we've got to be more like Martha; and we've got to give ourselves grace when we tend too much in one direction.

In the same way, our church is both Mary and Martha. We worship and pray together. We study scripture together. We gather around the communion table together seeking God's presence and fulfillment. But we cannot let it stop there. We must also go out into the world with eyes to see our neighbors who are hurting. We must stand ready to offer a cup of water to those who thirst, a word of healing to those who feel broken, and a community of solidarity to those who feel alone.

So, when we begin to look at those around us who have chosen another part... chosen to sit and chosen to work, may we not grow bitter or angry, but let us recognize that it takes all of us, doing our part, stretching ourselves and working together to be the whole church that God is calling us to be. Going and doing *and* sitting and listening... ever ready for holy interruptions to challenge our posture.