

WPC

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June 20, 2010 – Ordination/Installation of Deacons

Only One Thing

Luke 10:38-42

What an interesting reading from Luke's gospel. Ken Bailey notes that this text addresses the timeless question of the relationship between "word" and "service" (the Greek word for service is *diakonia* – appropriate for today, because that's where we get the English word "deacon").

Let's put this story in context. In the preceding verses, a lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. This dialogue presents the dual command to love God and love your neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan then follows, showing what loving your neighbor can look like. The story of Mary and Martha demonstrates how to love the Lord.

There's much that can be drawn from this story. For example, this is one of those times when we see Jesus' remarkable treatment of women. Martha is bustling around acting like she's in charge when Jesus and his disciples stop at her house. It's amazing that a first century rabbi is willing to be hosted in the home of a woman and her sister, both of whom are unmarried.

Mary's response to a rabbi staying at her home with his male disciples is shocking for her time and culture: she decides to join them! She "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what Jesus was saying." But Martha was *distracted* by her many *tasks* (again, the word used is *diakonia* – literally she was pulled about by much serving). Mary is acting like a male disciple of Jesus. Martha is acting like the female hostess busily preparing the evening meal, and she's upset that her sister is not helping with serving their guests as would normally be expected.

I love the reality of the gospels. This is such a real situation – an argument, hurt feelings, cross words. And I can relate to getting ready for an important guest – just imagine for a moment if Jesus was coming to your house. Apparently, there's a t-shirt that says, "Jesus is coming – look busy!" Well, I'd be flustered for sure.

I'd be cleaning the house and thinking about the menu and getting the wine glasses out, "bearing in mind that one of them could become extremely valuable" (Michael Wakelin). Yes, I admit it, I'd be Martha. And frankly I'd be a bit miffed if the rest of the family were sitting at Jesus' feet while I was making coffee, and even more so if Jesus told me that they had made the better choice.

What's going on here? Mary sits around while Martha is busy and she gets all the glory!? Martha's work that day was not trivial; hospitality finally means that somebody has to boil the water and slice the onions. I can't imagine Jesus saying to Christians who are building homes with Habitat for Humanity or baking corn bread for the soup kitchen, "You people are preoccupied with busy work. Leave the children, the needy, the ill, the lonely behind. Come sit and meditate for a while. This is the better part."

So I understand and even sympathize with Martha's reaction. She's frankly tired of doing all the work while Mary sits, and she lets her feelings be known. But notice how she does this: instead of confronting Mary directly ("Hey Sis, I need you to give me a hand"), she doesn't say anything at all to her. Instead, Martha tries to get Jesus to tell Mary to get to work: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Jesus' reaction to Martha's protest is, frankly, a bit surprising at first, and in fact has bothered a lot of people down through the ages. What Jesus does is to gently scold Martha and then, apparently take Mary's side in the dispute. "Martha, Martha," Jesus says, "you are worried and distracted by

many things, but there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen it; Mary has chosen the better part."

According to Tom Long, "if we're going to understand what this story is saying to us today, we have to grapple with this troublesome response by Jesus. Why does Jesus praise Mary over against hardworking, worn out Martha? Why does he say that Mary, who simply sits and listens, has chosen a better part than Martha, who is sweating away preparing a meal and trying to provide some hospitality? (Day1, July 22, 2007)

Let's look at Jesus' response again. Notice - we're not told that Martha is too busy with much serving; rather, we're told that she's worried and *distracted* by many things. Bailey says that "being distracted means one is led *from* something *by* something. The assumption of the text is that Martha is distracted *from* the teachings of Jesus *by* her 'much serving.'" The one thing that Jesus refers to is to prioritize his Word.

J. Fitzmyer states "*diakonia* (serving) that bypasses the Word is one that will never have lasting character." "For Jesus, *diakonia* that neglects his *word* is not pleasing." (Bailey) We need BOTH word and service. We need BOTH Martha and Mary. Luke 10 contains both the Parable of the Good Samaritan AND the story of Mary and Martha.

In the Christian life, love of God and love of neighbor is intertwined. "If we scold Martha too harshly," says Fred Craddock, "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." If we were to ask Jesus which of these two things we need more of- Mary's reflectiveness or Martha's activism - he would probably say yes.

According to Long, "We show our love of God by loving our neighbor, and the true love of neighbor grows out of our love of God. They're two sides of the same coin. And that, I think, may get us close to the real heart of this Mary and Martha story. There's nothing wrong in and of itself with Martha's fixing the food. This is the way people show love and welcome and hospitality and care. There is nothing wrong, in fact there is something absolutely essential, about showing one's love of God and neighbor by baking the bread and washing the olives. Martha, preparing that meal of hospitality, is doing a good thing--a necessary thing--an act of service--but if we try to do this kind of service apart from the life-giving Word of the gospel, apart from the vision that comes only from God, it will distract us and finally wear us down. Mary has chosen to listen to the Word. Jesus, the living Word, is present, right in her house, and if she is going to

love God and love neighbor, if she is going to show hospitality to the stranger and care for the lost, then everything depends on hearing and trusting that word.”

If you don't have a clear vision of God's teachings and what he's doing in our world, it's difficult to continue to serve others year after year. It will finally beat you down. Without God's Word, we can't go on preparing meals for the world, because it will finally worry and distract and exhaust us. But if our service springs out of the Word, then we can continue to prepare meals for the hungry, care for the sick, and show hospitality to the stranger without burning out, because we know that God is bigger than any problems we encounter, and therefore we don't have to lose hope even in the face of the world's hopelessness and despair.

Long tells a story of a friend of his who told him about taking a church youth group on a mission trip to Jamaica. On their trip they visited one of the local elementary schools, and they spent some time observing in 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, despite the poverty and the

chaos. They decided that the only way she could do this was that she must really love being a teacher. But they were surprised 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."

I think that teacher had been like Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet. And because she had, she could get up like Martha and teach those children with joy and hope, seeing Jesus in the face of every one of them. Thanks be to God for these sisters - the church badly needs both Mary and Martha.
Amen.