

July 17, 2022
Luke 10:38-42

Pentecost 6
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Better Part”

“Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Earning money by shovelling snow seemed like a good idea at the time.

After hearing the good news on the radio that schools were closed because of snow, my friends and I decided to get into the snow removal business, putting this unexpected free day to good use. There were four of us, so we figured that we could do several sidewalks and driveways and divide up the proceeds equally so that each person came away with a nice profit for a day’s work. It was a heavy snowfall, so it seemed like this was going to be a great day for us.

Everything started out well at first; most homeowners were glad to see four young men eager to shovel them out. But soon, our partnership began to show signs of trouble, as we started arguing over who was doing more work and who was not pulling their weight. We would argue about who was shovelling the most amount of snow, who was shovelling sidewalks the best, and who was making certain that no snow was left in a driveway. When a plow came along and piled snow at the end of a driveway, we would argue about who should deal with that heavy, packed snow, instead of the lighter snow on other parts of the properties. Should the person who shovelled the most snow get more money, or should the person who shovelled the heaviest snow? Soon we found ourselves arguing more than shovelling, and I do not think that the homeowners of the later properties were all that pleased to have four young people screaming on their front lawns. Our snow removal business did not last one day because we could not stop arguing about who was doing more work than the other person.

While snow removal would not be a thriving business in the land of the people of Israel, there were still occasions for people to argue about who was doing the most work. This is the case in today’s Gospel lesson, where Jesus visits the home of the sisters Martha and Mary. While Luke refers to their hometown as “*a certain village*” (10:38), in John’s Gospel they are identified as residents of Bethany, a town that is near Jerusalem. Luke also makes no mention of their brother Lazarus, who figures prominently in the Fourth Gospel’s account of Jesus’ visit to their home:

- “Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” – John 12:1-3.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ visit with Martha and Mary is set in the context of his journey to Jerusalem; he follows his instructions that he gave to the Seventy that “*whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you*” (10:8). His visit with these sisters follows his encounter with the Torah scholar, a man skilled in Scripture who had trouble hearing the Word of God; this became the occasion for Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan and his commandment to the scholar to “*go and do likewise*” (10:37), to show the same mercy that the Samaritan exhibited to the person in need. Both stories stand in a complimentary relationship; the parable of the Good Samaritan and Jesus’ visit to the home of Martha and Mary gain much of their meaning from the tense relationship between the two. The story of Martha and Mary highlights the overriding importance of devotion to the Lord’s Word as an expression of one’s love for God. As the Good Samaritan exemplifies the disciples’ seeing, Mary exemplifies the virtue of hearing. As a composite, they are model disciples, “*those who hear the Word of God and do it.*” (8:21)

The cultural context of this story relates to the practice of hospitality in first-century Palestine. Inviting a person into one’s home to share a meal was an invitation to be a part of the family circle; it was about breaking barriers and providing protection to guests no matter the personal cost. Extending hospitality to guests was a matter of social obligation and expectation; when three unexpected guests appear at the entrance to Abraham and Sarah’s tent while they were encamped “*by the oaks of Mamre*” (Genesis 18:1), Abraham and Sarah drop everything so that they might extend hospitality to these strangers.

- “When [Abraham] saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, ‘My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.’” – Genesis 18:3-5.

Hospitality was more than a matter of family pride in this culture; it could be a matter of life and death for travellers who found themselves in the desert without food or

lodging. Jesus would make hospitality one of the criteria in judging whether one was worthy to “*inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world ... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me*” (Matthew 25:35-36).

This tradition of hospitality is seen when “*a woman named Martha welcomed [Jesus] into her home*” (10:38). What is unusual about this is that the head of the household would usually be the one welcoming a guest; Luke’s statement that Martha opened her home to Jesus implies that Martha was an independent woman and was financially stable. Martha may have been a widow because there is no mention of a husband; she is the one who owns and manages the house. If she had lived with her husband or a brother such as Lazarus, Luke would have said Lazarus’ house or mentioned the husband’s name; in first-century Palestine, the house was attributed to the family’s oldest man, not a woman. In accepting her hospitality, Jesus is acknowledging that Martha is the head of this household and respects her as such. After reporting that Martha has welcomed Jesus into her home as the head of this household, Luke reports that “*she had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to what he was saying.*” (10:39). This is as unusual as a woman being the head of a household at this time; the phrase “*sat at the Lord’s feet and listened*” describes the actions of a disciple of Jesus (Paul describes his life as a student by reporting that “*I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today.*” – Acts 22:3). By sitting at Jesus’ feet, Mary is taking on the role of a male disciple; “*Mary acts as a disciple of Jesus, who allows her to hear the word of God.*” (Niveen Sarras).

Mary’s actions do not go unnoticed by her sister. Not only is she breaking social barriers in taking the place of a male at Jesus’ feet, but she is neglecting her duties to provide hospitality to her guest, leaving Martha sweating in the kitchen preparing the meal for their guest by herself. Mary “*neglects her duty to assist her sister in the preparation of the meal, and by violating a clear social boundary she is bringing shame to her family.*” (Alan Culpepper). Luke describes Martha as being “*distracted by her many tasks*” (10:40), focusing on being a good host as Sarah focused on preparing a meal for their surprise guests at Mamre (“*Abraham hastened to the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’*” – Genesis 18:6). Martha expects her sister to assist her in being a good host to their guest and become increasingly annoyed as she sees Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet instead of helping her with the meal. Finally, Martha has had enough: she leaves the kitchen, interrupts Jesus as he is teaching Mary, and asks Jesus “*Lord, do*

you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” Martha’s protest is justifiable; anyone who has ever experienced a situation where a sibling does not seem to be helping with household chores could understand why she is so upset with her sister’s actions and why she asks Jesus to intervene on her behalf:

- “Martha is exhausted by the burden of hospitality that has fallen on her shoulders. She asks Jesus whether he cares that Mary left her alone to serve the guests. She asks Jesus to tell Mary to assist her. Martha’s complaint is fair.” – Sarras.

At this point, the reader might expect Jesus to encourage Mary to get up and help her sister with the household tasks, assuring her that their lesson could continue later. But instead, he turns to Martha, gently acknowledging her exhaustion and at the same time reminding her of her distraction: *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.”* (10:41-42a). Martha’s “many tasks” that are causing her to be distracted can also be translated as “service” (*diakonia*), which is a major aspect of being a disciple. Martha’s problem is that she has focused entirely on her service in fulfilling the role assigned to her by society; she has allowed secondary matters to distract her from hearing the Word of God that is present in her home in the person of Jesus. The repetition of her name – *“Martha, Martha”* – conveys a mild rebuke or lament. Martha’s cares about fulfilling her duties have thrown her life into disorder, preventing her from attending to Jesus’ teachings. Jesus gently teaches her that the duty of the love of God and obedience to God’s Word take precedence over all other concerns; *“Jesus does not want the diakonia to be at the expense of the ministry of the word. Both ministries are important. The ministry of diakonia should not absorb our energy and time and drive us to neglect God’s word.”* (Sarras).

Jesus points to Mary as the one who has *“chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”* (10:42b). While Martha has presumed to tell Jesus what he should do, Mary lets Jesus tell her what she should do. By choosing to attend to Jesus’ teachings while laying aside everything else, Mary exemplifies what it means to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”* (Deuteronomy 6:5). Mary recognizes that the Word of God that is present in Jesus is the *“life [which] is the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* (John 1:4-5). Mary recognizes that Jesus has *“the Word of eternal life”* (John 6:68), and this Word is *“a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”* (Psalm 119:105). In choosing to listen to the Word

of God above all else, Mary has chosen “the better part,” the gift of God’s eternal Word that will not be taken away from her.

- “Jesus describes Mary’s choice as a good part that will not be taken away from her because learning God’s word always inspires believers to serve ... Jesus does not ask Martha to give up the ministry of diakonia; instead, he intends to relieve Martha from her anxiety and exhaustion by inviting her to join her sister in learning from him. Then, she can resume her hospitality with her sister.” – Sarras.

In many traditional interpretations of this story, Martha comes out looking foolish, so distracted by her household tasks and fulfilling her role as a host that she neglects to listen to the teachings of Jesus as her sister. But Jesus’ words to Martha are not words of scolding or judgment; rather, “*his correction to her inquiry is filled with love.*” (Crystal DesVignes). Jesus is not chastising Martha for working to serve her guest; he is concerned that the burdens she is carrying are robbing her from experiencing the abundant life that Jesus desires for his followers, that the ministry of serving others in the name of Jesus should not come at the expense of being fed and nourished by God’s holy Word. Jesus encourages Martha and all his followers “*to be aware when we are getting distracted by many things and to choose Jesus – prioritizing ‘the better part, which will not be taken away.’*” (DesVignes).

- “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. If we are to ask Jesus which example applies to us ... his answer would probably be ‘Yes.’” – Fred Craddock.

The story of Martha and Mary, the importance of both listening to God’s Word and serving in Jesus’ name, reminds us of the importance of the commandment to “*remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.*” As I mentioned in my recent newsletter article, I grew up in a community that enforced so-called “blue laws” that restricted commerce on Sundays; in my hometown, the only store that was open was the corner store that sold milk and newspapers. While sabbath observance has mostly focused on what we are not allowed to do, in Luther’s explanation of this commandment in the *Small Catechism* the focus is on what we are called to do on the Lord’s Day instead of engaging in our everyday tasks and obligations: “*We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching of God’s word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.*” The Lord’s Day is the day for us to set aside the tasks in which we engage in serving others in Jesus’ name so that we

might sit at Jesus' feet and learn what it means for us to be Christians in this time and place. It is a day for rest, refreshment, and renewal, strengthening us in God's Word and Sacraments so that we might go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord. As we cannot allow our work to overwhelm us so that we neglect God's Word and the rest we need to engage in our work, we cannot remain at Jesus' feet while neglecting the tasks that our Lord has set before us. We are called to be both Martha and Mary; there is a time for us to sit at Jesus' feet, and a time for us to get to work in "*serving all people, following the example of Jesus*" (ELW Affirmation of Baptism).

- "Jesus responds to this condition of being fulfilled yet unfulfilled, very busy yet unconnected, all over the place yet never at home. He wants to bring us to the place where we belong. But his call to live a spiritual life can be heard only when we are willing honestly to confess our own homeless and worrying experience and recognize its fragmenting effect on our daily life. Only then can a desire for true home develop. It is of this desire that Jesus speaks when he says, 'Do not worry ... Set your hearts on the kingdom first ... and all these other things will be given you as well.'" – Henri Nouwen.

Our snow removal business might have survived more than one day if we had not become so distracted with who we perceived was carrying more of the weight of work than others, who was not doing their fair share, and who was more deserving than others. We could have recognized that each of us had different gifts for different parts of the job: one person might be better clearing steps and sidewalks, while another could handle the heavy snow left by the plows. We could have realized that we needed to take a break from lifting that heavy snow, that it was a way for us to enjoy a snow day rather than another burden placed upon us.

We are called as God's people to be a servant church, embodying the love of God in Jesus Christ in both word and deed. We need to be about the tasks that our Lord has set before us, but we also need to take time for sabbath rest to be refreshed and renewed in God's Word. Being a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ means being both Mary and Martha – hearing the Word of God and serving others in the name of our Lord who came not to be served but to serve. The bottom line is that "*diakonia and the Word of God require each other.*" (Sarras).

Amen.