

Finding Balance
Luke 10:38-42
July 22, 2007

Last week, we heard one of most famous stories of the gospel – Jesus’ encounter with the inquisitive lawyer with whom Jesus shared the parable of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer, as you probably remember, wanted to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him what he thought the answer was, and sure enough, he knew: love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus congratulated him on the rightness of his answer, but then the lawyer asked Jesus for a clarification of the word “neighbor,” hoping, I suppose that there might be some limits on whom he had to extend himself for. So Jesus told a parable about the Good Samaritan, one who loved his neighbor as himself, and the lawyer was told to “go and do likewise.” Perhaps Jesus knew that this young man was strong in theory but weak in practice. Maybe he sensed that he was good at finding time to study scripture and to pray in the Temple or his hometown synagogue, and was careful in his observance of the ritual laws, but that he hadn’t been able to translate his personal piety into actions that would impact his neighbor and the world. Jesus rightly diagnosed his problem: The lawyer needed to be up and doing.

Today’s gospel lesson is the companion piece to the Good Samaritan, and it too is one of the most famous stories in the gospel. Jesus comes to the home of his good friends Mary and Martha to spend an evening relaxing with them and the disciples before he continues on his way to what he knows will be confrontation and hostility and death in Jerusalem. It is an oasis for him of peace and tranquility. Martha, as the good hostess, exemplifying the best in Jewish culture, busily prepares a meal for her guests. In the traditions of Sarah and Abraham who entertained three unexpected visitors with a feast and thereby welcomed angels of God, so Martha knows that it is her duty to offer hospitality to anyone who comes to her door. That it is her friend Jesus makes it only that much better.

Martha, we might say, knows the rules of hospitality and of neighborliness just as well as the young lawyer knew the laws of piety and purity. She’s an expert. And so she busies herself in the kitchen. There must have been a flurry of activity in the kitchen as she worked to prepare a meal worthy of her friend Jesus. Because she loved him, she probably put extra effort into the meal preparation. She wants to show her love in the food she prepares. Now, I can fully understand and appreciate this. In my home, growing up, food was love. And when my mother put her special meatloaf or pot roast on the table, she was putting herself there for us. It was her love offering.

So it is for Martha, as she really puts herself out for this meal, running back and forth, making sure everything is perfect. Of course in the process she gets a little frazzled, a bit anxious about how everything is going to turn out and how she’s going to get it all done with only her two hands. The logical solution, of course, is for her sister Mary to provide the needed extra pair of hands.

But Mary is in the front room, sitting with the disciples at the feet of Jesus, enrapt in conversation. Jesus is talking and the time is flying by, but for Mary it is as if time is standing still. You know how it is when you’re totally in to something? Totally in the present moment? Children know how to do that in their playtime. We adults lose that ability unfortunately as we age, but once in awhile, we can recapture it. Earlier this year when Maxine and Georgia both spent the weekend at the Carter Conference at UGA, I felt in their descriptions of the event, that sense of being caught in the present moment, listening to a respected, revered person, capturing every word, savoring every moment.

Well, that's how it was for Mary. Jesus was talking and everything ceased around her as she listened -- which was great for her, but no help at all for the overworked Martha. I can imagine Martha spotting her sister just sitting there, doing nothing, that her anxiety was enhanced by growing anger. Perhaps you can sense her eyes narrowing and her shoulders stiffening as she thinks of the injustice of it all. The weight of this entire dinner party is on her shoulders while her sister, the one who should be at her side helping, is hanging on Jesus' every word, oblivious to the clattering of pottery or her sister's frustrated call to her.

So, overwhelmed and with her sense of righteous indignation rising, she marches into the midst of the gathering to enlist Jesus' help in getting Mary up and out to the kitchen where she belongs. Luke says she was "distracted by her many tasks," and so you might think she'd just go grab Mary by the back of the neck if necessary and drag her off to the kitchen -- that she'd express her anger and disappointment, frustration and even fear of being an inadequate hostess to the person who is giving her such grief. But no -- she doesn't address her sister directly.

In the best popular psychology jargon, Martha "triangulates." She goes to a third party to express her frustration with her sister, hoping that this third party will be a go-between and resolve the situation by tipping the balance in her favor and exerting his influence over Mary. I wonder too if Martha isn't a little bit jealous of Mary. Mary's getting all of Jesus' attention, and there she is slaving over a hot stove. So she puts Jesus the test as well as enlisting his help in recruiting Mary for kitchen duty. "If you love me," she's saying, "you'll take my side" "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Jesus response offers a good lesson to us in two ways. What do you do when someone enlists your help or comes to you with a complaint about another? My son and daughter used to do it about each other all the time. I still remember Meg's little 5 year old voice, "Mom, Seanie's being mean to me." Which meant, of course, "come to my aid, tell him to stop, be on my side." And sometimes our impulse is to jump in on the side of the one making the complaint without asking questions. When I was the office manager for a group of 7 physicians, I learned the hard way, that with one doctor in particular, I needed to be the one to get to him first with any controversial decision or occurrence, because it was the one who got his ear first, that he believed, no matter what. He wasn't able to step back and evaluate a situation before jumping feet first into the middle of it.

No so Jesus. He looks at the symptom, Martha's urgent, self-righteous plea for help, and goes to the cause. It's not Mary that's the problem. It's Martha's having been driven to distraction by all of her many tasks. And so he's able to say to her with kindness and with compassion, "you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion and it shall not be taken away from her."

Jesus sees into Martha's heart and understands her better than she understands herself. The Greek words for "anxious" and "troubled" have the literal meanings of "being drawn in different directions," and "making a disturbance or an uproar." Jesus sees that Martha is troubled with cares, drawn in different directions, and marking an uproar in her tiredness and sense of being overwhelmed. Jesus doesn't not criticize the work she's doing or the way she's chosen to serve him; he is only concerned with the attitude of her heart and her mind.

She is missing the one thing necessary. Her anger has overshadowed her love for Jesus, her pleasure in being a hostess, her joy in serving him and the disciples that day. Her service was no longer a gift to him, an opportunity for hospitality, but had become a burden, dissolving into a desire to justify herself to Jesus, and to control her sister.

When she burst into the room and interrupted Jesus' conversation with the disciples and Mary, Martha was definitely upholding the principle that actions speak louder than words! Unlike the lawyer last week, Martha understands that we must be up and doing.

I love Martha because I recognize the best of her and the worst of her in myself. For many of us, our discipleship, our love for God is demonstrated by our love for our neighbor – by doing something! Like Martha, we like to be active; we probably tend to measure our discipleship more in the number of meals that we serve or number of battered people we've rescued from a ditch, than in the number of Bible verses we've read or minutes we've spent in meditation or prayer. The Good Samaritan is our example. Jesus said "go and do likewise," and that's how we've patterned our lives – in active, giving, caring, compassionate discipleship.

I also see the frustration that comes from having too much to do – too many priorities, too much need in the world, and too few hands being lent to help. And it gets to be overwhelming. Right now the Health care sub committee of One Athens is struggling with the need for medical care for indigent patients. There aren't enough doctors in Athens/Clarke County willing to see poor patients, patients without insurance. Maybe you read the article in the Banner-Herald about a week ago concerning this problem. I know from my work with the Athens Nurses' Clinic the frustration they feel when they have to turn people away, but 40 people a day is about all they can handle, and financial constraints keep them from opening more than three days a week. And just this week I received a letter from the Neighborhood Health Clinic asking for donations. They were turned down for a grant to fund another physician because on paper our area looks like it has enough doctors to supply the need. And sometimes you just want to throw up your hands and say, "Lord do you not care that my [sisters and brothers] have left me to do all the work by myself?"

The only way to survive that kind of burnout is to take Jesus' advice to Martha, to look at Mary, Mary who seems to be doing nothing just sitting there, but who is actually in the quiet process of recharging her batteries, of finding her focus, of rediscovering and learning again just why it is that we are called to be so busy in the first place.

I keep going back again and again to the words of Steve Harper in his book "Prayer and Devotional Life of United Methodists." "Genuine communion with God," he says, "enables us to know and share God's heart. Compassion is the natural outflow of a vital devotional life. . . . Personal holiness fosters and strengthens social holiness. The two are as inseparable as inhaling and exhaling. . . . If we only inhale, we will explode. If we only exhale we will be exhausted. If we only commune with God, we will become "spiritually bloated"; if we only exhale we will become "spiritually depleted." (p. 30)

This is not an either/or story, as it is so often presented, with Martha getting the short end of the stick. It's about becoming whole, it's about finding balance between loving God with our all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves, and integrating the two into our journey of faith. The person who finally masters the balance of these two poles, may become like Brother Lawrence, at 16th century French monastic, who was appointed to kitchen duty when he joined the monastery. Sounding a bit like Martha, he fretted that he would not be close to God in such a setting. But then he realized that it was his heart that had to change and not his job. He wrote his thoughts down over the years in letters to friends that have been compiled under the title "The Practice of the Presence of God." In it he wrote, "The time of business is no different from the time of Prayer. In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, I possess God as tranquilly as if I were upon my knees before" God. May it be so for you and for me as well.