



## Sermon

July 18, 2010  
The 8th Sunday After Pentecost  
Luke 10:38-42  
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### Inseparable

When Donna (our Church Administrator) handed me this Sunday's church bulletin for the usual Thursday proof read, she asked, "Are you preaching about Mary and Martha this Sunday?" I nodded yes. "Good luck," she quipped. "I really don't like that story. As a woman, it really bothers me. No matter what you say, you're going to upset somebody."

Luke's story about Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha always stirs up debate. Matter of fact, there's an argument going on in the story itself, even before all the quarrels over what Jesus is trying to say to his followers.

Here's the argument in the gospel story: Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem (and all that awaits him there) visits the home of two of his favorite people. Sisters. Look, see busy-bee Martha, offering immediate hospitality, greeting Jesus at the door, other guests, too; then busying herself with meal preparation. Hospitality, welcoming guests and feeding them well isn't the invention of Paula Deen and the Food Network. Generous hospitality is among the most important virtues in Martha's Jewish culture.

In the midst of all the hospitality hub-bub, now meet sister Mary sitting at the feet of the Jesus, like a student listening attentively to what the teacher is saying. It's a wonder she could hear anything because the clatter of dishes and clanging of pots and pans growing louder and louder. The hearth isn't the only thing red-hot in the kitchen. Martha is stewing, annoyed at working ALONE while Mary is in another world, with Jesus.

Past the boiling point, stressed-out by trying to do everything, juggling all there is to balance putting dinner on the table, Martha lets it rip. Not to her sister, mind you, but to the guest, Jesus. "Lord, don't YOU care that my sister won't get off her a-double-scribble and has left it all to me. Tell her to get up and help me!"

Ever seen those WWJD bracelets ("What would Jesus do?") meant as a reminder to consult the Lord about handling any situation? Change the letters. WWSD – for "What SHOULD Jesus do." The poor guy is in the middle of a sister-fight. What should he do? Defend himself? Reassure Martha, doughy hands, sweaty brow and all that he does care? Tell her she's got a point? What about getting off HIS can and finishing the meal or doing the dishes? Or be the peacemaker: "Ladies, ladies, c'mon. We can work this out."

What Jesus does sets up all the interpretive arguments about the story (and is likely behind Donna's advice to avoid this text). What Jesus does is gently scold Martha right back, thus appearing to take Mary's side in the dispute. "Martha, Martha, 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."

Danger! Danger! Using the word "better" in an argument between two sisters? Jesus, what are you thinking? How come Mary, who sits and listens has chosen the "better part" than Martha, who is sweating, preparing a meal, and trying to offer some hospitality?

Some say Luke, who gives us this story, has his own agenda. Luke is bugged by a rising tide of

women in leadership roles in the church. So, chiding Martha for her active working, doing, taking-charge and praising Mary who is passive and quiet is way of letting women know their place, like it says elsewhere in the New Testament – “women should keep silent in church.” (I Corinthians 14:34-35)

The problem with this interpretation is it doesn't square with the rest of the Gospel of Luke where women are anything but passive and silent. In Luke as a whole, women are prominent, powerful, worthy, articulate and celebrated. Luke gives us Mary's Song about a woman turning the world upside down because of the child she's carrying. Then, there's a poor widow in a parable, whose aggressive persistence takes down a judge. Look no further than where Mary sitting – at Jesus feet! This is a position of privilege, a place reserved for male disciples. No, this story is no put-down to women's leadership in the church back then or now.

With no disrespect intended, the Pope again refusing to allow for the ordination of women.... The Holy Father didn't get that idea from Luke! OR Mary and Martha!!

Back to the question. Why does Jesus praise Mary and defend her against Martha? Other interpreters say this is Jesus criticizing “busy work” Christianity. Martha is so preoccupied with chores, cooking, rushing around taking care of guests that she is out of position to receive the deeper spiritual gift Jesus is trying to give. Mary is the typical religious person so busy with being a Church Trustees or Council member; or so busy baking pies or cooking meals for the homeless they lack an interior life. These don't-just-stand-there-DO-SOMETHING people SHOULD BECOME Don't-just-do-something- SIT THERE people. In other words, stop being religious people, be spiritual people.

Not a bad idea. How many say: “I'm not into organized religion. I don't care for the institutional church. It's more important to be spiritual than religious. Yet, Christianity is far from the abstract alone. Christianity has always taken on an embodied form. “The word became flesh and

dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) Jesus as the incarnation of God means that God came among us NOT in otherworldly ideas, concepts and lofty thoughts but in ordinary, earthy details. Martha's hospitality was not in the abstract. Someone needs to bake the bread, boil the water and chop the onions.

Think about parent-child relationships. Loving a parent or a child is more than sentiment and feeling. It means hands-on teaching how to tie shoes, wiping away dried blood and salty tears from skinned knees. It means hugs and hanging-in-there when relationships fall apart or mistakes are made, endless trips to the doctors, interpreting the intricacies of Medicare and the drug “donut hole” when parents become like children and children become the parents. Busy work? No way. Working for Habitat for Humanity or cooking and serving the homeless? I don't think so. I cannot imagine Jesus saying: “Leave the busy work. Leave the children, the aging the lonely behind. Be spiritual, not religious. This is the better part.”

Still others say, just look at the text. It's right under your nose. The Mary-Martha story is right smack after The Parable of the Good Samaritan. What Luke is saying is how we should love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength AND neighbors as ourselves. Period. Loving God and loving neighbor are NOT either-or propositions. It's a both-and situation. The two cannot be separated. Following Jesus, the love of God incarnate, loving God AND neighbor is intertwined. A person shows how much they truly love God by loving neighbor. Loving others grows out of loving God. Two sides, same coin.

This is a very Wesleyan idea that would have been familiar to the first Methodists. The Wesley's crisis of faith was a response to heady, rational, the uninvolved-in-daily- life, sit-in-the-pew-and listen Christianity of the Church of England of their day. Their so-called Holy Clubs and later Methodist bands and classes were the means to connect piety with works of mercy. They believed in practical, serviceable (not merely cerebral) divinity.

I read about a group of clergy advising a college chaplain. In an evaluation period, they asked the chaplain "What are the morals of college students nowadays?" The chaplain thought for a minute and answered: "I think you'll be pleased. The students are ambitious towards their careers, but that's not all. A lot of them tutor kids after school or work in homeless shelters. Many participate in demonstrate for peace, etc...." As the chaplain talked, the rabbi on the panel chuckled. One of other clergy said, "What's so funny?" The rabbi replied: "I was just thinking that you talk about our students as good people. And they are. They're involved in social causes. Better still. But I was wondering... do they lack a vision of God's salvation."

The minister and priest on the panel were surprised to hear the rabbi talking about salvation, from their Christian perspective about it anyway. They looked at the rabbi with puzzled expressions.

"What I mean," the rabbi said, "is if you don't have some vision of what God wants for creation; if you don't have some concept about God's heart and Spirit inspiring the repair and renewal of the earth, then you can't get up and work in the soup kitchen or stay up all night volunteering at the shelter. You'll wear out. Without some vision of what God wants for the world, the blessing God wants to impart, all the volunteering in the world gets beat down."

If a person doesn't have some vision of what God is doing, it finally wears a person down. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to that vision. Without that Word, one cannot go on like Martha, bringing hospitality at home or to the world. It will finally overwhelm us with worry or distract or exhaust us. Beat us down. But with that Word, we prepare meals for the hungry, care tenderly for the sick, show hospitality to the stranger.

What word do you think Mary heard at Jesus feet? Blessed are you who are poor, the kingdom of heaven is yours. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. When you did

it to the least of these, you did it to me. Peace be with you. Do not be afraid.

What we hear at Jesus feet is that our lives are gathered into God's life, that God is out there, busy in the world calling new life from death, hope from despair and helping growth to happen from the most difficult of places. Because of that, what we do for others counts.

A visitor, a young man stopped by St. George's inspired by reading about the new life between St. George's and Mother Bethel. He told me about his feeling called to the ministry of a Deacon in the United Methodist Church (i.e. one who is ordained to word and service as opposed to word, sacrament and ordering the life of a congregation as an elder – like me). This young man wants to work as an extension of a congregation, an outreach of the church. In this young man's case, he's sought a ministry in an impoverished neighborhood. He told me that following God's calling he and his wife left rural NY State for inner city Greensboro NC, where they teach in an inner city elementary school days and evenings freelance on street corners, trying to get youth hooked into community programs and off drugs and alcohol. They have even opened their home to aid in the recovery of some folk. He told dramatic stories about transformations in people's lives—in classrooms and in neighborhoods – because of this outreach. And how deeply rewarding it has been.

I commented about how his sense of calling must be very powerful because of all the difficulties, frustrations and disappointments endured in this type ministry, how they must really be committed to stick with it. You could have knocked me over with a feather duster when he articulated his experience this way: "Yea, it's hard sometimes. But I come here every day because I love Jesus and see Jesus in every one of these children."

This young man reminded me doing the Martha thing is all wrapped up in doing the Mary thing. There isn't one without the other. They're inseparable. What this young man showed me was how being busy for Jesus AND being able to sustain the deep intensity of his service had

come from sitting at Jesus feet. Hearing the word. Being fed and nourished by it.

So, when Donna asks me tomorrow what I preached today, or if you talk to her first, tell her I said as far as Mary and Martha go, it's not a matter of choosing one over the other. Or, like the old Smothers Brothers bit, "Mom always liked you best!"

Mary and Martha are better together than alone, better inseparable than apart. Like white on rice. Like Jesus says about loving God with heart, soul and mind AND our neighbors as ourselves. A person can be so overwhelmed by the demands of life they can't do either one. But then Jesus comes through our door, to our place and speaks to us in the midst of life – in the busy kitchen and the living room. Let us sit at his feet and get the word AND hearing, let us rise and get busy loving, serving others in his name.

■■■ Amen ■■■