

Genesis 18:1-10

Luke 10:38-42

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Disciple or Distracted?

Just when we thought we had this discipleship thing all figured out we run into this story in the gospel of Luke. Mary and Martha.

Have you ever noticed that this familiar story of Mary and Martha follows immediately on probably the even more familiar story of the Good Samaritan. The story of the Good Samaritan is kind of a boilerplate story for teaching discipleship, isn't it? In fact Jesus tells the story to illustrate his command to 'love your neighbor.' It is the story of a person the hearers would least expect, a marginalized person, a Samaritan, caring for a person who has been beaten and robbed and left for dead. Who is your neighbor? Everyone. And how do we love our neighbors? How do we follow Jesus' commands? How do we be a disciple of Jesus? By showing our love through doing. In the Gospel of Jesus Christ love is an action word! The Samaritan, in that story, sees, goes, bandages, lifts, takes, pays, promises. "Love is shown in verbs."¹ as one commentator put it. Clearly, based on this story, love, discipleship, following Jesus, is in the doing.

Then this morning in verse 38, the very next verse in Luke's story of Jesus, we meet a woman who is doing, doing, doing - all to exercise hospitality, a long standing practice of faith, community and yes, love, dating back to Abraham and Sarah as we heard in the story Claudia read for us this morning and is illustrated so beautifully in the bulletin cover art this morning. But here this time, in this story, doing does not seem to cut it. Instead 'stop and listen' seems to be the moral of the story. What do we make of this!?

Jesus, and maybe some of his friends and traveling companions, stop on their journey to visit two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha, almost certainly the older sister (I am an oldest sister) set about immediately organizing and preparing the

¹ Rev. Dr. Amy E. Richter, This one thing, 9 Pentecost, Proper 11 C - 2-13, <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2013/06/26/9-pentecost-proper-11-c-2013/>

house and a meal for their guests. She consults her budget to see what she had to spend. She gathers the necessary food. She chops the vegetables. She set the bread to rise. She prepares the table. She does what needs to be done when welcoming a guest.

Mary though, oh Mary, true to form undoubtedly, was so excited to see Jesus that thoughts of anything else went right out of her head. Once he was in and settled, all she could do was sit at his feet and soak in every word. She was so taken with him and what he had to say that even the fact that her sitting there listening to him would certainly scandalize not only her but him also, her being, you know, female, did not faze her. There she sat.

I imagine that having to deal with this kind of behavior from her sister was not new for Martha. That is the way Mary has always been. And she Martha, was always having to ‘remind’ Mary that there are rules to be followed and work to be done. This time though it was particularly frustrating because she too would like to be able to sit and listen to Jesus, to put the tasks and the rules of her day out of her mind and just be with Jesus, but she could not do it.

She could at least try to get Mary to help though, to do the things she was suppose to be doing! Jesus would understand. She just had to remind him of the way things are suppose to be. He would back her up. “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

And here the story turns. Like when Jesus says, it is not the priest or the Levite but the Samaritan, the one you would least expect to be the good one in that story, who helps the person, stripped and beaten and lying in the ditch. It is not the one, Martha, who is doing, serving (Luke goes so far as to use the root word here diakonia, from which we get our word, Deacon to describe Martha’s work!) It is not the one who is deaconing who get’s Jesus’ affirmation. It is Mary, the one who has seemingly blocked out all that needs to be done in order to sit and listen. Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”

And with one brief, and for some of us painfully poignant story, the gospel writer reminds us not to get carried away with our ‘doing’.

I have struggled with this story for what seems like forever. First because, I have always most identified with Martha.... doing and doing to the point of distraction,

of too often forgetting what is really important, not stopping to listen and just be when that is most needed. That is where I err.

And then after becoming a mother of sisters, wishing this story did not seemingly pit sister against sister and women's calling against women's calling. There are precious few stories of women in scripture. Couldn't there have been a better way of teaching the importance of keeping our focus on Christ than tangling it up with women's roles in society and the value of what is typically called 'women's work'? This week, because I have so much trouble with the passage, I decided it was time to go into it rather than avoid it. Looking at it paired with the story of the Good Samaritan helped me.

In the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan man and says, when you go and do as this person does, this marginalized one, this one you would not give the time of day if you could help it, when you go and do as this one does, you are doing the will of God, you are living your faith.

And then Jesus continues, in the very next verse. As if to say, "I know how you people can be though. I know how easily you can get lost in the details, busy with the tasks at hand and forget why you are here, why you are doing the tasks in the first place - to share the love you know in me."

"Don't swing too far the other way, letting your work get in the way of our relationship. *Doing* is good, very good, but doing without being in communion with me and with one another, that is not good. Do instead like this woman, Mary, again one marginalized, one you would just a soon not even see, do like this woman, and take time to sit and listen - pray, study, simply be with one another and with me.

New Testament scholar, Alan Culpepper puts it this way, "Neither the story of the good Samaritan nor the story of Mary and Martha is complete without the other. Each makes its own point - the Samaritan loves his neighbor, and Mary loves her Lord - but the model for the disciple is found in the juxtaposition of the two."²

Discipleship is about doing and about being. About actively working to create communion and community for others, and about nurturing that communion for ourselves. This is important for us as individuals and as a congregation.

² Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9, page 232.

Martha's doing, Martha's deaconing, is not the problem. The problem is, in that moment her doing, her busyness kept her from seeing the opportunity to simply 'be' with Jesus. How often do I, or you maybe, how often do we miss an opportunity for deepening our relationship with God or with another one of God's creation because we are distracted? Not that our work is not good or important, but sometimes we let it get in the way and we miss 'the better part' as Jesus calls it in this story.

Discipleship means doing. It does! Remember the Good Samaritan. But we must remember Mary too. When we are doing to the point of distraction, when our doing keeps us from stopping and listening really listening to God, being in communion with God and with one another we are missing something very important, in fact the most important.

You see the title for the sermon this morning is 'Disciple or Distracted?' As I went about my days this week, with this text churning around in my mind, this phrase, 'disciple or distracted' kept popping into my train of thought, like a flashing hazard light. I do distraction so well.

Discipleship, following Jesus, doing as Jesus does, as Jesus teaches, that is loving with our whole heart, body and mind God, our creator and God's creation, that discipleship takes many forms. Sometimes it does mean chopping vegetables in the kitchen, scrubbing floors, making up beds, writing letters, doing, doing, doing and sometimes it means sitting and listening to, listening for Jesus in the midst of our days.

Disciple or distracted? May God help us, you and me, choose the better part, whatever that may look like in our days this week.