



“The Posture of Discipleship”
Scripture – Luke 10:38-42 (Mary & Martha)
Sermon Preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 31, 2016

Over the past fifteen years, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has started a number of programs geared at preventing clergy burn out. There’s *Company of New Pastors*, which gathers new ministers into cohorts of support and encourages devotional practices that nurture our own faith in God. There’s the *Credo Program*, which holds pastors accountable to fostering healthy habits in *all* areas of life – from family to finances to faith. There are seminary courses on ‘self-care’ and Spiritual Direction groups included in the cost of tuition. All because our denomination realized that too many pastors were not equipped to handle the stresses of professional ministry and were leaving the church at astounding rates. (Don’t worry – this is *not* an announcement; I feel very well supported in ministry and, most of the time, well prepared for its demands.) But, I think this speaks to a problem that is by no means unique to clergy. In our driven, success-oriented, workaholic society, it is very easy to get on the fast track to burn out.

Many of us are run ragged, struggling to juggle our various commitments: the job that just never seems to fit into the hours from nine to five; taking care of children or grandchildren – which means shuttling them from soccer practice to piano lessons to that one kid’s birthday party; staying in touch with family and friends who are scattered all across the country; keeping the house *reasonably* clean and the refrigerator stocked. And then, there are the things you do for Westminster – spending your evening at a Session meeting or teaching Vacation Bible School or delivering flowers to members at a retirement home or purchasing school supplies for our Backpacks Project. There is so much that has us flying around, trying to meet deadlines *and* make it to the swim meet *and* get food on the table *and* serve God in the midst of all of this. Whatever our vocations, whether work or volunteer service or parenting, it is easy to go and go and go until we realize we are running on empty. We have nothing left to offer our workplace or our school or our family or our church ...

I have to think this is what’s happening with Martha in today’s story. It’s just speculation, mind you. When you only have five verses of Scripture to work with, you have to fill in the gaps. But that’s really the only explanation that makes sense. Martha is running on empty. She has been pouring herself out in service to her guest, even though her own well has run dry. So, as she darts about the kitchen – setting out the olive tray and topping off Jesus’ wine glass – anger and resentment seep into the space that joy has vacated. Now, let’s be clear – Martha is *doing* exactly what she is supposed to be doing. She has welcomed Jesus into her home and is preparing the meal that will sustain him as he leaves this village and continues his long journey toward Jerusalem. This is the kind of hospitality Jesus described at the beginning of chapter 10, when he sent seventy disciples on ahead of him to sit at the tables of strangers and proclaim, “The Kingdom of God has come near!”¹ It is the kind of hospitality that Jesus, himself, models during the Last Supper, when he says, “Who is greater, the one who [sits] at the table or the one who serves? ... I am among you as one who serves.”² Preparing and serving a meal, what the Greeks

called *diakonia*, is foundational to the church's understanding of service. In fact, this term – which Luke uses to describe Martha's frenzied work – is where our word 'deacon' comes from. And we know from our own Deacons just how vital such ministry is to the life of the church. Though many have read (or – rather – *misread*) this text as a testament to the superiority of the contemplative life, the story of Mary and Martha is *not* a critique of active service. By kneading the dough and washing the grapes and setting the table, Martha is doing the painstaking, often-overlooked work of ministry.

The *problem* ... the problem is *not* with Martha's hospitality, but the spirit with which she offers it. You see – Martha is *distracted*. Well, that's the word our translation uses, at any rate. According to the original Greek, Martha has been 'drawn away.' Her many tasks have *drawn her away* from that which really matters. Her work has *drawn her away* from Jesus, who is sitting in her living room proclaiming "the Kingdom of God has come near!" Instead of sitting at Jesus' feet, drinking in a life-giving word like her sister Mary, Martha scurries around the kitchen, mixing up the hummus and checking on the lamb kebabs. And as she works, her resentment grows – a passive aggressive sigh here, a not-so-subtle glare there – until, finally, she interrupts Jesus to complain, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?"

The irony is that as Martha runs herself ragged to get food on the table, her sister feasts on the bread that truly sustains – the Word of God. Out of love for her Lord, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus – a place reserved for the students of great rabbis – to hear his teachings and to fill up on good news. It is good news that Martha desperately needs to hear; clearly she is hungry for a word that sustains. But her tasks have drawn her away from the one who is the source of all life.

Did any of you who read along with the Scripture lesson notice what comes just before the story of Mary and Martha? ... The Parable of the Good Samaritan – one of the most well-known stories in all of Scripture. (Many of us heard Pastor Greg preach it earlier this summer.) Unless we are reading straight through the Gospel of Luke, we rarely hold these two passages together. Which is a shame, really. Because – together – these stories illustrate the greatest commandment – the one the lawyer recites in verse twenty-seven: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

The Samaritan shows us what it means to love your neighbor ... Mary shows us what it means to love God. She sits at Jesus' feet, assuming the posture of a disciple, because she loves God with her heart, soul, strength, and mind, and she wants to nurture that love. But here's the thing: I bet the Samaritan showed mercy to that man he found on the side of the road because he also loved God with all his heart and his soul and his might ... because he had recited this commandment to his children and posted it on the doorway of his home, just as Deuteronomy instructed him to do.³

And, I bet Mary, after hearing the good news, did rise from her place at Jesus' feet to serve her neighbor. Because anyone who is steeped in God's word cannot remain idle, but must "Go and do likewise," just as Jesus commands.

We cannot separate love of God from love of neighbor, feasting on the word from serving at the table. One leads to the other, for once we have filled up on the good news of God's grace, we must pour ourselves out – like Jesus – in service to a broken world.

But, friends, we cannot go out in service until we have sat at Jesus' feet. As we learn from Martha, we must rest in Christ's presence and feast on the bread of life. If we do not take the time to replenish our stores of love and grace, the well will run dry and our work will be nothing but distracted busy-ness. So I ask you: What does 'sitting at the feet of Jesus look like for *you*? How do *you* rest in Christ's presence?

Perhaps, like Mary, you spend time feasting on the Word of God by studying Scripture and listening for God's still small voice. Maybe you seek out the restorative beauty of creation because enjoying God's handiwork is the closest thing you have found to communion. Or, you try your own hand at forming things of beauty, because creativity reminds you that you are made in the image of God. Maybe you run marathons or practice yoga, knowing that each breath you take connects you to the one who formed our bodies from the dust of the earth and first breathed life into us. Maybe you nourish your spirit through the fellowship of friends who reflect the love of Christ, or through acts of service wherein you meet Jesus in a neighbor in need. Perhaps you find renewal in the rhythm of worship – of gathering week after week around this font and this table. For me it's all of these things in different seasons of life ... But – above all – it is engaging the Word, discovering the way the Holy Spirit still stirs the text to life, which most consistently draws me into Christ's presence.

Whatever it is, Jesus invites us time and again to sit at his feet and be renewed by the Word of God. This was good news for Martha, whose frenzied preparations kept her from the bread that truly sustains. And it is good news for us, who are so easily drawn away from the source of life as we give into expectations and demands that run us ragged.

We do not know what happens after Jesus responds to Martha's complaint, saying: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things; there is need for only one thing. Mary has chosen [literally – *the good portion*], which will not be taken away from her." His words sound strange to our modern ears, like he is stoking the fire of sibling rivalry by praising Mary over Martha. But Jesus is simply drawing Martha's – and our – attention to the food that is truly needed, the portion Mary has chosen by sitting at the feet of her Lord.⁴ This is a case of compassion getting lost in translation; as one scholar puts it, "[Jesus' words are] less a condemnation of Martha's frenzied activity and more a commendation of Mary's posture as a disciple."⁵

We do not know what happens next. But we can hope that Martha heard this response as an invitation – an invitation to leave her tasks and take a seat beside Mary at the feet of their Lord.

We *do* know that Jesus soon left that house to continue his journey, stopping along the way to sit at more tables so that others could feast on the Word of God. We can imagine that Martha went back to the work of hospitality, this time filled with joy because her service was rooted in her love for God. And we can picture Mary joining her at the table, showing love for her neighbors by serving a meal to the next guests to come to their home. Because after sitting at the feet of Jesus, these sisters could not remain idle. None of us can remain idle. Because we have heard the good news from Jesus' mouth: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be filled ...' 'Your sins are forgiven,' 'Your faith has made you well,' 'Do not be afraid,' 'Go in peace.' We, who have taken our place at the feet of Jesus and feasted on the Word of God, must "go and do," as the story of the Good Samaritan teaches ...

Renowned preacher and professor, Rev. Dr. Tom Long, tells the story of a church youth group visiting an elementary school while on a mission trip to Jamaica. During this visit, he says: "*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."*⁶ 'I come here every day because I love Jesus.'

Such love fills us, transforms us, and propels us to love the world more fully in the name of the one who first loved us.

When we, like Mary, have been filled by words of love and grace while sitting at the feet of Jesus, we cannot remain idle. Having been nourished, renewed, and transformed, we must return to the table or the classroom or the soup kitchen or the work place, and serve like Martha ... Sitting at the feet of Jesus. Serving at the table. Both are postures and practices intrinsic to discipleship. As we learn from Luke, we cannot love our neighbors as ourselves until we have rested in the love of God. *And* – unless we serve our neighbors in need, we do not love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind. Both are essential to the journey of faith. So sit down and listen; take your time at the feet of Jesus, feasting on the Word of God. Fill up on the good news Christ brings, so that you can pour yourselves out in service. And then get up and go.

FOOTNOTES

1. Luke 10:1-11
2. Luke 22:27
3. Deut 6:4-9
4. Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation Series), 152.
5. Mikeal C. Parsons, “Commentary on Luke 10:38-42,” www.workingpreacher.org
6. Rev. Tom Long, “Mary and Martha,” http://day1.org/1052-mary_and_martha

Prayers of the People ~ Tom Stout

God of grace,

Who are we that you should care for us,
and yet you surprise us with grace
and infuse us with hope.
Make us ever more faithful to you and servants of your caring.

Hear us now as we pray for the world and her people:
We pray that you would open new ways to
support the needy, and to protect the weak;
and that you would thwart the plots of terrorist and extremists...

We pray for our nation and for your guidance
as we enter the seasons of upcoming elections ...

We pray for loved ones: remember our children and those who care for them.

We pray in joy for those newly born, as we pray in hope for those facing the ending of life ...

Receive these and all of our prayers as we were told to pray the prayer of Jesus:

“Our Father