

July 17, 2016

“On the Fallacy of Keeping Score When Dealing With God's Grace”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

This morning's text is a short, simple story of an encounter between Jesus and two sisters Mary and Martha. Over the years, this story has developed a kind of reputation in the church as an illustration that folks will use to show that Jesus emphasizes the contemplative life, the life of prayer, stillness and reflection as the preferred mode of discipleship.

In other words, Mary gets it right. She understands what it means to follow in the way of Jesus. She knows that being a disciple means sitting at the feet of our Lord, listening to him with an open heart, longing only to hear to his good word.

On the other side you have Martha, oh Martha, busy, worried, distracted Martha. She's the doer, she's the server, she's the one who steps up to the plate when folks are getting hungry and she jumps right in, busying herself away for the sake of being busy. Over the years we have heard it said, be like Mary- sit, pray, listen, don't be like Martha- busy, worried, distracted.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with this interpretation. And it does seem to me to be a relevant word for us today especially in an age where we worship our busyness and our hyper-connectivity. Linda Stone a technologist once said "the disease of the Internet Age is continuous partial attention."

Everyone playing Pokemon Go right now just looked up and said "what?"

It is true, even when we are here we are really somewhere else, even when we find some time just to sit and be still for a moment or two the pressing weight of our schedules, agendas, and responsibilities start to feel too much to bear. So we start moving, we start doing, hoping with a sense of quiet desperation that somehow, somehow this will bring about the peace and joy of life that we so desire.

Our world, our culture, reinforces this narrative by telling us that if we aren't constantly doing, if we aren't busy creating, or being hyper-productive then we're missing the point because the point of this whole thing we call life is for us to work hard to create the life we want to live.

To bring us back to the text, I wonder if this is the point of the story? Maybe it is or maybe it's only **part** of the point of the story. See I kind of feel like over time we've built up this false dichotomy between the contemplative or prayerful life and the life of active service. We human beings have this tendency to be "either or," "black or white," "right or wrong." We think in terms of binaries and dualism. We want things to be neat and simple and in order so that we can understand it, process it, store it in the proper compartment in our lives and then move on to the next thing.

The truth is though that when you dealing with life, humanity, and in the case of this story, with family, it's never quite so simple, it's never quite so cut and dry. And the Bible reminds us time and time and time and time again that we find God in the midst of the mess, in the midst of the complex and complicated, in the grey of our world.

Perhaps you are like me and you empathize with Martha in this story. Jesus and his disciples are just wandering around the region as they make their way to a certain village where it's Martha who welcomes them into her home. Hospitality is something that is super important in the Bible, from the story of Abraham in the very beginning of the whole thing, all the way through the New Testament and the life of the early Christian church. How you treated your guests was a sign and a way that you showed your love for God.

Hospitality in the Bible extended also beyond the limits of modern etiquette in that you were asked, called, even commanded to extend hospitality to the stranger in your midst, for in doing so you never knew if you were serving one of God's angels.

Hospitality, during the time of Jesus, was crucial to the life of faith and everyday life in the Middle East. So for Martha, extending hospitality to Jesus and his disciples was in fact a way for her to live out her love for God and for her neighbors. It's also worth noting that hospitality is hard, especially when you are dealing with Jesus because Jesus traveled with a whole cohort.

It wasn't just opening up your house for an intimate dinner party with a few friends. No, it was a whole to-do with a large group of travel-worn folks. One can imagine the amount of work it would take to put something like this together without the benefit of Evites or invitations, choosing the perfect date that fits in the calendar or enough lead time to do some of the prep-work in advance.

So Martha is in there working away getting everything ready when she notices that her sister is just sitting there listening to Jesus. She gets herself nice and worked up, filled with the self-righteous anger of humble servanthood, and she approaches Jesus saying to him "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to all the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

Jesus says to Martha, with the intimacy of a close and trusted friend speaking truth in love, "Martha, Martha you are distracted and worried about many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her."

I like to think that Martha was baffled by this response and had to take a moment to step back and think about it. "What exactly is Jesus trying to tell me here? What is he trying to teach me?"

One thing that we know about the Christian life, the spiritual life, is that it is a life of both contemplation and service. It's always been a mixture of the two and we really shouldn't try to place emphasis and value of one over the other. Thomas Merton, the greatest writer on contemplative Christianity of the 20th Century once wrote, "All Christian life is meant to be at the same time profoundly contemplative and rich in active work."

So if Jesus' point isn't trying to emphasize one mode of Christian being over the other, why does he gently rebuke Martha in this way? I think that what Jesus is trying to teach us is that the spiritual life is an inside job turned out. The spiritual life is an inside job turned out.

One thing that we see time and time again in the gospels is that Jesus knows and understands the hearts of the people he interacts with. We see this when he's dealing with those who are trying to trick him: he knows their hearts and their real intentions. We see it when he calls the disciples he calls to follow him: he knows their faithfulness even when they get it horribly wrong. And we see it here when Jesus is able to minister to Martha in this moment, naming for her this truth that her resentment and worry has distracted her from the one thing that truly matters.

Martha approaches Jesus with a desire for him to set her sister straight, with a sense of superiority and moralism that comes with feeling justified by doing all the right things. Martha is doing what we all have a tendency to do; Martha is keeping score. She's keeping score just in case Jesus is too busy teaching others about the kingdom of God to notice all the work that she's been doing.

She's busy getting everything ready, **but not too busy in self-less service** to keep track of all the small and large deeds she's been able to accomplish, all the ways she's fulfilling her call to God and to Jesus.

And when the score becomes too lopsided she decides that she has to finally say something to Jesus to make sure he evens the score before it becomes a blow-out between her righteousness and her sisters. This is when she comes to Jesus with her request. Jesus help me to set her straight.

But Jesus knows her heart. He knows the resentment and judgement that's built up within her. He knows that she's not living in joy and peace. He knows that she's functioning with this idea that her service is earning a more holy place at the table. He knows that she's keeping score just in case he wasn't noticing all that she was doing for his sake.

He knows that her "selfless service" was actually more about the building up of her own ego and self instead of giving it away. He knows that the only way she ever find true peace is when she remembers the one thing she's forgotten as she's been so distracted and worried trying to put herself in the place of God.

I don't know about you, but I can definitely identify with Martha. I can see how easy it is for us to fall into the trap of judging other people with resentment in our heart for all the ways they fail to love their neighbors as we love ours. I think many of us, maybe even all of us, sometimes fall into this trap of seeing others, as one pastor put it, "through the lens of our own personality," projecting the way we move through this world onto others and keeping score to see where they measure up and where they don't.

It happens in big and in small ways. Let me give you an example. The other day I was at Von's right over here on Euclid doing some grocery shopping. I grabbed my hand basket, loaded it up with the essentials and made my way to the check stands. It's Von's, so it was packed and there weren't enough check stands open. I was carrying my basket, which was very fully and heavy, while I waited to unload it on the belt. Now the person in front of me unloaded their items, totaling 18 in the 15 or fewer express lane, on the belt taking up the entire belt, for 18 items plus a couple of reusable bags! Can you believe it? I was standing there somewhat outraged because when I unload my basket I try to take up as little space as possible on the belt. Almost as if it were a game of who could use the space the most efficiently.

I think of it as being considerate to those who are waiting to unload their baskets as well. This person however was obviously inconsiderate and self-centered, or at the very least oblivious to others who are waiting in line. I found myself saying in my head things like, well I guess this is their world, I'm just living in it. Man that sure is a lot of judgement on someone as a person just for their grocery line behavior.

I imagine Jesus speaking to me, to each of us in these moments saying, you are distracted and worried about many things but you've lost sight of the one thing you so desperately need, choose the better part, choose the good part, choose God's part.

The one better thing that we lose sight of is framing our story within the enduring story of God's grace made known through Jesus Christ. We become so entrenched in our own stuff, our own egos and our own ongoing internal narrative of how we are moving through this world that we lose sight of the fact that we are part of something that is so much bigger and more wondrous and more beautiful than each of us alone.

We forget that we are woven together in this tapestry of life and love and grace, of which, each of us is but a thread. The challenge is that we get caught up looking at all the other pieces of thread noticing and highlighting all the differences and deficiencies of each without catching a glimpse of the fullness of the whole.

We forget the one thing that matters most, the sacred story of our God who created the universe with a word of light and love, that life sprang forth, and God called it good. We forget that God kept loving us even when our love failed, which it did, time and time and time again. We forget that God spoke to us through holy people who called to us to remember God's steadfast and enduring love and to be drawn out of ourselves for the sake of others.

We forget that in the fullness of time God came to be with us in the flesh, God made a home with us full of grace and truth, in a man we call Jesus who walked from town to town preaching and teaching and healing for the sake of this kingdom of God where all can dwell in grace, peace and in joy.

He invited people to take this sacred story, this vision of abundant life into their hearts and to allow it to transform them from within; for he knew that we couldn't be free from fear until we had perfect love living in our hearts. He knew that we couldn't be free from judgement until we intimately knew God's forgiveness for our sins. He knew that we couldn't be part of making a more peaceful world until we had owned the gift of peace in our deepest part of our very being.

Because of his life, his way, his vision for this world, he was put to death on a cross where he gave us his final word on the matter, "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing." He was resurrected from the dead as God's vindication that the way humble sacrificial love is better than the way of the world, it is the way to eternal life, the fullness of life here and now.

The way of Jesus is always mixture of contemplation and action, prayer and service. It is not an "either or," it is a "both and" life. It is an inside job turned out. Jesus cares about the state of our hearts. Jesus cares about how it is with our souls. Jesus cares not just about what we do but he cares about why we do it.

Jesus cares for us especially when our hearts are heavy and our heads are low. It seems like just about every week we experience something in our world that weighs heavy on our being. This week was no different as we witnessed the attacks in France and the various ways that we react as a community and as individuals.

We hear the cries of those who mourn, the solutions some are quick to offer, the shock, the pain, the anger, the disillusionment that so many of us feel. As a Christian community we come together each week to center ourselves on this one better thing, this one good thing, the sacred story of God's undying love for the world, because sometimes that's all we can do but luckily, Jesus says, to us, as he did to Martha and Mary, this one better thing will never, ever be taken away.

Thanks be to God.

Notes:

Stephen Prothero: Religious Literacy: What Every American Should Know—And Doesn't. HarperSanFrancisco, 2007.

Rev. Susan Kendall. "Reflections on the Lectionary." The Christian Century. June 22, 2016.