

Sermon for July 17, 2016 – “Knowing the Difference”

16th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Luke 10:38-42

Between her newspaper column and her 15 best-selling books, Erma Bombeck has said some really funny things. Here are three examples:

“Do you know what you call those who use towels and never wash them, eat meals and never do the dishes, sit in rooms they never clean, and are entertained till they drop? “If you answer, ‘A house guest,’ you’re wrong – because I’ve just described my kids.”

“Getting out of the hospital is a lot like resigning from a book club. You’re not out of it until the computer says you’re out of it.”

“Housework, if you do it right, will kill you.”

But she was also quite poignant as well. In her book, “If Life Is A Bowl Of Cherries, What Am I Doing Here In The Pits,” she tells of two moments in her husband’s life:

She wrote: “There was a time when the children were growing up that her husband used to go and look at the back yard. Surveying the muddy patches where the lawn should be, he would wonder: “Will the grass ever come back?” And then there was the time when the children were grown and gone that her husband went and looked over the beautiful green lawn, immaculate from lack of use and wondered: “Will the **children** ever come back?”

Some parts of life are temporary. Some are eternal. Wisdom knows the difference.

This is the fundamental issue at stake in the story of Mary and Martha. The story Luke tells of Mary and Martha is a controversial one. It angers some people and confuses others especially when they identify with one sister or the other or when they take the side of either Mary or of Martha. Some people look at the story from Martha’s point of view. They say that Mary let Martha down. They say that she should’ve done her share of the work and helped Martha serve Jesus and His disciples. Those who sympathize with Martha say that if we take Jesus’ rebuke of her seriously, if we’re to believe that Mary did the right thing, and that Martha should have sat down with Mary and listened to Jesus, then who would have made and served the food?

Others, of course, look at the story from Mary’s point of view. They say that **Mary** did the right thing when she chose to sit by Jesus and learn from Him (that Jesus is, after all, the Lord). They say that Jesus Himself confirms this, when he tells Martha that Mary has chosen “**the better part.**” I don’t think anyone here today doubts that what Mary chose to do when Jesus came was a good thing. Nor do I think anyone doubts that Martha was completely out of line asking Jesus to chastise her sister. Still, the question remains, what about Martha? What, if anything, was wrong with Martha’s choice? Didn’t Martha honor the Lord by her response to His presence? Didn’t she show love towards Him by serving Him? This is the dilemma of today’s gospel reading.

These two women are portrayed welcoming Jesus; one by feeding Him and His disciples, the other by listening to His teaching. Both are faithful responses but, as we see, these responses seem to contradict each other. Why? Is there more going on here? More than what we’ve seen so far? The short answer is yes. Yes, because in asking Jesus to chastise Mary Martha fails to show love as she should (certainly as Jesus would). In Martha’s effort to love one neighbor, Jesus, she takes love away from another neighbor, Mary, her sister. But there’s more still to the story of Mary and Martha. To get at that, we need to look at the context of the story within Luke’s gospel.

Today's reading is preceded by a parable, the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we read last week. It's offered by Jesus, in part, as a response to the question of a lawyer who asks Him: **"what must I do to inherit eternal life?"** Jesus asks the man what the Law says and the lawyers says that he must: **"Love 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."** Jesus tells the man that he's correct and then says: **"do this and you will live."** The lawyer then asks **"And who is my neighbor?"** Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan. The passage ends with the words: **"Go and do likewise."** We see then, that the emphasis is on **action...** **"Do this and you will live"** and **"go and do likewise."** Now comes the story of Mary and Martha. Here's a real life situation about being a neighbor and we see someone doing that which leads to eternal life. We see Martha **doing**, laboring in love, to please her Lord. But, and this is crucial, we also see Mary, and Mary, who in **her** love for her Lord is not working. Not **doing**, per se, but simply **being** with Him, listening to Him. Martha, distracted by all that she's doing, comes to Jesus and in her anxiety and frustration asks Him to rebuke Mary. **"Lord,"** she says, **"...tell her then to help me."** Then Jesus' response to Martha isn't a criticism of her work for Him or even of her love for Him, rather it's a criticism of her **choice**; a choice born of her anxiety and anger. A choice born of her anxiety and anger...Hmmm – this sounding familiar to anyone? **"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, there is need of only one thing."** There is need of only one thing. Only one thing is necessary; and what exactly is it?

Well, the next few stories in Luke's gospel are about prayer which is important because there's always a purpose behind the structure of the gospels. One scholar suggests what that purpose is, when he says that, **"the doing of the word flows out of the hearing of the word."** In other words, our living, the things we do, are effective only as it comes out of prayer, studying scripture, worship and reflection. God's word must be **heard** before it can be **followed**. **Spiritual** bread is as necessary as **physical** bread. A spiritual life is only as good as one's spiritual practices.

Think about our church for a minute... What makes us here different from a service club? What makes us different from groups like Kiwanis, the Lions, or the Rotary Club? Worthy groups all, but don't they do many of the same things we do? Don't we all work, and fairly hard at that, at helping others? So what's the difference between us? What makes us a church, and others a service club? What indeed?

There's a lot of talk about burnout, especially in seminaries. It's a well-known fact that those in the care professions; doctors, social workers, nurses, ministers, etc., often suffer from burnout...Many to the point of exhaustion. They work hard and throw themselves into their job, caring deeply. But, after a while, many come to a point where they simply have no more to give. It's not so much that they no longer care, it's that they're no longer **able** to care. People suffering from burnout often end up angry, anxious, worried. We see something like this in today's story of Mary and Martha. We see Martha getting so anxious in her attempts to care for Jesus that she's unable to care for Mary, failing to see the importance of what's going on around her.

To avoid burnout, we should balance our activities, take time for ourselves and practice self-care. We should have a strong belief system. We should be big enough, strong enough to encompass the big picture, one that reminds us that we should know how to **receive** help and care and not just give it, which we talked about last week. Our belief system also needs to be big enough to remind us that not only are we responsible for caring for others but that we're not the **only** one's responsible for caring for others. Balance. Faith. Receptivity. The manna that fed Israel in the desert fell from heaven, they didn't have to work for it. It came from God...but they did have to gather it in each morning. Likewise, the spiritual "daily bread" is a gift from God. But, like manna, it too needs to be gathered. We do not live by bread alone, say the scriptures, but by every word comes from the mouth of God.

“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.”

Martha, Martha, you are so busy serving Me, so concerned that the right things be done, that you’re missing **Me**...the necessary thing. Isn’t it true that sometimes the best way to treat a guest is not by doing something special for them? But by spending as much time with them as possible? Especially when that guest is Jesus? **That** is the point of the story of Mary and Martha. Some parts of life are temporary. Some are eternal. Wisdom knows the difference.

Occasionally we need to put aside the work we do for the Lord and just spend some quality time being with Him, time learning from Him, time enjoying His presence, time being refreshed and recreated by His Spirit. The church is different from a service club, because it recognizes this---at the very least it should recognize this. It should because I think our very existence depends on it! We, all of us but especially our leadership, should recognize that God’s Word gives life, meaning, and strengthens us for living. And so the church turns toward God and listens to God’s Word. Before we do anything else, we should pause and sit at the feet of the eternal – similar to the way Mary sat at the feet of Jesus because, it’s the **word** that enables us to serve and gives us the ability to make any kind of a difference in that service. We Christian’s don’t simply **do** the word, we must also **hear** the word, **dwell in** the word. And, I don’t mean just show up for an hour or so Sunday morning and list to a brief snippet of scripture, or joining in the unison prayers, or bowing our heads during the silent prayers. No, I mean spending time on a regular basis with the word, time in prayer, study, time entirely focused on the word. The word that was made flesh in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Martin Luther said that “to be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” He said on one occasion that “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours of my day in prayer.” Similarly, the late Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary General of the UN, said that because of his hectic schedule of flights and meetings across the world he got up an hour early to pray. He then added “But when I’m extra busy, I get up 2 hours early to pray.” Well, we may not be able to make it two or three hours but if we want to have any kind of meaningful relationship with God, if we want to discern God’s presence and will in our life as with any relationship, if we want to hear God’s voice and to experience God in our lives, we need to make time with God. Sure, some of us are like Martha and some of us are like Mary. The church has its share of both Martha’s and Mary’s. But in everyone, in every church, is the need to combine the two. I mean everyone, but especially those in leadership because without spending time **with** God, without sitting and listening **to** God, our work **for** God can only lead to anxiety, anger and angst. And, of course, without **doing** the word, our faith is clearly nothing. *Without doing, our faith is nothing.* “Faith without works” as James letter famously tells us, “is dead.”

A Methodist minister named Graham Hutchings once said: “There is a need to occasionally get the visionaries in the kitchen, and the kitchenaries in the vision.” Some parts of life are temporary. Some are eternal. Wisdom knows the difference.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.