

“Choosing the Better Portion”

Luke 10:38-42

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Church

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Having lived in the mid-West for more than a decade, I learned that for anyone born and bred in America’s heartland, there are few transgressions WORSE than the sin of laziness. However, you don’t have to live in Kansas or Iowa or Indiana for that matter to understand the virtue of hard work. If you were raised like my father was, during the Great Depression, then most likely you possess an abiding faith in hard work AS WELL. For years, my dad was a conductor for the Pennsylvania Railroad, and he got up 5:00 every morning to collect tickets on the 6:20 train out of South Amboy, NJ that was headed for New York’s Penn Station. Then he worked the rest of the day at Dry Dock Savings Bank in midtown Manhattan as a filing clerk before working the train back to South Amboy every evening. At 7:00 each night, more than thirteen hours after he had first walked out our kitchen door, he dragged his tired body back through it only to repeat the process AGAIN the next day, and then the next day, and then the day after THAT. He worked two jobs for quite a few years- he HAD to because, along with my mother (who ALSO had a full-time job), they wanted to be sure that my brother and I would achieve what neither of them had ever done- receive a college education. The day my father died—which was almost half a century ago now--he had put in a full day of work even though people who saw him told me he looked like a dead man walking. He was only 57 years old.

Well, for those of us who ALSO believe in the ethic of service and hard work, this morning’s text may come as somewhat of a surprise. After all, here we have Martha working especially hard to make the occasion most special and yet it is her SISTER, the one who would rather lounge at his feet and listen to his words, who gets all the praise. We might have expected Jesus to say instead, “You know, Mary, Martha can’t be expected to do all the work by herself. She’s spent the past three hours cleaning the house, setting the table, and preparing a meal fit for a messiah to honor me with and you just sit there, taking your ease. Martha has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.”

But is that TRUE? Is Mary just shirking her duty, trying to get out of work, or has she, as Jesus said, “chosen the BETTER portion?” When I was a kid, it

was my twin brother Howard who wanted to be the minister in the family. When Sunday rolled around, HE was the one who looked forward to going to church- not ME. I HATED it and my parents knew it. Therefore, while Howard would head off for Sunday School in his nice, pressed suit, I would often have to mow the lawn or paint the house or clean out the garage. I can still hear myself pleading, “But dad, it’s just not fair that while he gets to go to church, I have to stay home and cut the grass. Why is HE always getting out of work.” My father would just laugh, “David, who are you kidding? You CAN’T STAND church.”

The truth is that Mary is anything BUT slothful or lazy. Rather, she’s involved in the highest, most important work of ALL- being disciplined by our Lord. The most important responsibility of this or ANY church is to create FAITHFUL as well as FAITH-FILLED disciples of its members and that’s precisely what JESUS was doing with Martha’s sister. A disciple is a loyal follower of our Lord who strives to be faithful out of a profound sense of love and gratitude for all that Christ has done for him or her. It is not necessarily the person who only shows up at church on weekends and puts a few dollars into the collection plate; someone who serves on a committee or two when asked and attends the annual ice cream social when invited- after all, a little time and money is all such a commitment requires. Rather, what Christ demands in becoming a loyal, committed follower of his is nothing less than our entire LIVES! He demands our hearts, our minds, our souls, and our spirit.

But before he can receive any of THAT, he first has to have our attention; he must first have our ear. Before we can begin to serve Christ in any kind of capacity, we have to learn to sit quietly at his feet and drink from his words as Mary is doing HERE. We have to discover the joy that comes from sitting in Jesus’ presence and subjecting ourselves to his teaching and instruction. Otherwise, it becomes impossible for us to EVER become obedient to him.

But what IS listening? Listening is focusing or centering on the other person; it is concentrating on the one before us, giving him or her our undivided attention. Listening thus becomes a gift of self to the other person. It is making, for that moment, the person who is talking the most important individual in the world to you. It is an art that is slowly learned without which it is difficult to develop ANY kind of deep and meaningful relationship- whether it involves one’s relationship to a spouse, to one’s children, or even to one’s God.

Jesus told his followers, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can

do nothing...If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.” The key to the Christian life is thus learning to “abide in Christ,” and such living and resting in him begins when we take time out for PRAYER. I’m talking about REAL prayer, SERIOUS and CONCENTRATED prayer- not the rote kind we offer up every Sunday when we recite the Lord’s Prayer together, and I’m not referring to those short memorized prayers we say before meal time or which we prayed as children just prior to crawling into bed. I’m talking about prayer that is “deep calling unto deep” as the Psalmist says; I’m talking about prayer that trusts in the presence of One who loves us and longs to hear our highest joys and deepest concerns. It is to be able to say as the poet Alfred Tennyson once expressed, “I should be sorely afraid to live my life without God’s presence, but to feel he is by my side just now as much as you are, THAT is the very joy of my heart.” The bottom line is that we can’t become a GROWING church until we first become a PRAYING church, that is, a people who are passionate about him because we just can’t bear to tear ourselves away from his presence.

We abide in him when we spend time in the SCRIPTURES and reflect on their meaning for our lives. When we recognize that God addresses us through his Word and are able to discover God’s will for our lives in them, then it will mean more to us than those few verses read by the worship leader prior to my weekly sermon. Rather, the scriptures will be viewed as essential to our MORAL and SPIRITUAL health and development as air and food are to our PHYSICAL survival. When Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the “better portion,” he is referring to a better “serving of food.” Thus, he is saying that Mary has her priorities straight, that more important than the meal Martha has been busy preparing is the food that Mary is receiving from HIM, from HIS presence and of course from his teachings- the most important food of ALL!

More than forty years have passed since I first heard them but I can still remember what Brother Arnesen--my college professor--would say about meditating upon the scriptures. He said, “When you read the Bible, look first to Christ as he is portrayed in the gospels and reflect upon his words and character because it will slowly work its way into your OWN life and character as you do so!” He was in effect restating what the great evangelist DWIGHT L. MOODY once said about the scriptures: “Get into this book and this book will get into YOU.” What both my professor and the great evangelist meant by that was as we learn to spend more time in the Word of God and gradually open our hearts up to its correction and healing balm, we then find ourselves gradually being transformed into the likeness and character of our Lord himself. There can be no shortcuts to this

process- only disciplined prayer and spiritual meditation can help us achieve that.

We also abide in him when we get serious about WORSHIP, when church is about hearing from and responding in gratitude to the great things God has done for us through his Son. Worship is really about listening when God speaks to us through the proclamation of his Word and then allowing its truths to work its way into our heart and mind and spirit and soul. The sermon is intended to communicate our Lord's purposes to his followers. It is not an entertaining talk to help fill up the hour but the express means by which God's purposes and commitments are made known to us. Both Luther and Calvin insisted that God speaks directly to us through the proclamation of the Word, and unless our hearts and minds are attuned to receive it, we miss his voice ENTIRELY.

However, what IS important for us to remember about this morning's text is that Jesus is NOT implying that worship and quiet contemplation are in themselves superior to Christian service- he's not trying to privilege the one spiritual practice over the other. But as we are frequently reminded, our works of charity act as a barometer and are a response to our relationship to Christ himself. As we receive his love, we in turn channel it to those around us as selflessly and as generously as we have received it ourselves.

Dr. Tom Long, professor of preaching at Emory University, points out that because this story concerning Mary and Martha immediately follows the Parable of the Good Samaritan, some commentators have concluded that with that parable, Luke is trying to illustrate the importance of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, and by following it up with this account of Mary and Martha, he is establishing its corollary, the importance of loving God with all our heart. Dr. Long rejects this reasoning because he knows you really CAN'T separate the love of God from the love of neighbor so neatly. That's because in the Christian life, the two are intertwined; they're mixed together so that you can hardly tell where the love of God ENDS, and where the love of neighbor BEGINS. Rather, we show our love of God by loving our neighbor, and the true love of neighbor grows out of our love of God- they're two sides of the SAME coin. Says Long in a sermon he preached on this morning's text:

And that, I think, may get us close to the real heart of this Mary and Martha story. There is nothing wrong in and of itself with Martha's fixing the food. This is the way people show love and welcome and hospitality and care. In fact, there is something absolutely essential about showing one's love of God and neighbor by baking the bread and washing the olives, by putting out those bottles of glue in Church School and nailing those boards for Habitat for Humanity and serving the cornbread in the soup kitchen. Martha, preparing that meal of hospitality, is doing a good thing—a necessary thing—an act of service. But if we try to do this kind of service apart from the life-giving Word of

the gospel, apart from the vision that comes only from God, it will distract us and finally wear us down. Mary has chosen to listen to the Word. Jesus, the living Word, is present, right in her house, and if she is going to love God and love neighbor, if she is going to show hospitality to the stranger and care for the lost, then everything depends on hearing and trusting that word.

Here, we have Jesus telling Martha that as important as her service to him is, still, all DOING must FIRST begin by LISTENING. When he said to his disciples that we must be “hearers and doers of the word,” he was laying down the principle that we must be “hearers” first and “doers” second, that intentional listening to his Word as he speaks to us must precede any action we undertake on his behalf. As any good soldier knows, before heading out to the battlefield, he or she must first receive his or her marching orders, and so must WE!

As I close, let me say what I think is actually the most AMAZING part of the whole story- it is that Jesus desires to come to the home, right into the living room of Mary and Martha so as to become an essential part of their lives in the FIRST place. Rather than create distance between himself and people, he comes to them, RIGHT INTO THE LIVINGROOM OF THEIR OWN HEARTS where he then draws them into his OWN personal space. That is simply because there is nothing MORE important to him than the cultivation of deep, loving, honest relationships. When I was in seminary, I went to hear Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach who was then appearing on campus. A renowned religious teacher, composer, and singer known as "The Singing Rabbi," he was noted for creating a new form of heartfelt Judaism that was filled with a love for all human beings. His stories were unique in that they closely resembled Christ's OWN teachings by relating the good in every person, holiness in the outcasts, treasures in the beggars, and righteousness in the rebels.

With guitar in hand, Carlebach entered the room, placed a chair in the middle of it, and after taking his seat, asked everyone to get up out of their OWN chairs and gather all around him on the floor. We did as he requested, remaining respectful of his own personal space. But the rabbi wasn't satisfied. He wanted GREATER intimacy with us so we were instructed to come CLOSER. We all complied by inching forward a few more degrees. Not satisfied, he became even MORE insistent, “No, I want you closer STILL!” Again, we all inched forward, but careful not to touch the person in front of us or on either side. “NO!” he demanded, “I want you to come REALLY close. Don't be afraid- I won't bite you.” Well by that time, the audience was now SO close we were practically ON TOP of him; there was no longer any space between him and the audience. At that, he smiled and said, “NOW we can begin.” At that, he picked up his guitar and for the next two hours, enthralled us with Yiddish songs (many of which he composed himself) and

wisdom drawn from ancient Jewish tales. Known for his frequent hugs of men and women alike, he often said his hope was to hug every Jew—perhaps every person—on earth. Afterwards, I thought that this was probably the closest I would ever come to experiencing what those disciples felt as they sat in Jesus’ presence, hearing HIM expound on God and God’s love. That one evening with Rabbi Shlomo changed the way I looked at our Lord FOREVER!

What this means is that as Jesus came to Martha and Mary’s that day, he no less desires to come into OUR homes, into OUR living rooms—in fact, right into our own HEARTS--this very morning so that there is no longer any space between him and US. He wishes for US to sit at his feet and to hear his stories and to absorb his teachings, and in this way, we not only become attuned to the sound of his VOICE but we find ourselves helplessly falling in love with HIM, AS WELL. Therefore, whatever service or activity we involve ourselves in will THEN be in obedience to him and in accordance with HIS will rather than our own. As important as activities or plans or programs or any OTHER kind of “busyness” in the church are, they are not the answer to greater health and growth, spiritual or otherwise. It’s not what we DO but what we ARE that’s most important to our Lord and it all begins with our willingness to spend time in his presence and listen to HIM speak- whether through prayer or Bible study or spiritual worship. Let us pray...

Gracious Lord, like Mary, make US hunger for the good portion, for the greatest food of all which is to enjoy your presence and to hear your voice. May all we do in this life proceed from appreciation and gratitude for all you have given us and all that you continue to provide. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.