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Luke 10:38-42
“A Good Education”

Sometimes the best teachers in life are full of surprises. Sure, we've all been subject to the occasional pop quiz, but I speak of a surprise that is far more life-changing. Movies like *The Sound of Music* or *Dead Poet's Society* starring Robin Williams show how teachers can open new worlds to their students when teaching about life through the lens of music or poetry. In Sidney Poitier's 1967 classic, *To Sir, With Love* surprised his students by treating them like young men and women, by answering their questions about life with candor and honesty, by challenging them to overcome the boundaries built because of race, class and religion, by exposing them to the world outside of their neighborhood – of the beauty of the arts – and in doing so helped them respect themselves and one another. His unconventional but life-affirming lessons changed the lives of his students and prepared them for adulthood. We might remember these sorts of teachers in our lives. I recall a favorite professor in college who liked to keep us on our toes. He would, at any given moment, jump on top of one of the tables in the classroom, continuing his dynamic lecture as if nothing had happened – but more importantly, through his teaching, showed us that we could have a positive impact on our community and on our world.

Today, our great teacher is full of surprises himself. Immediately after preaching the parable of the Good Samaritan, immediately after teaching his disciples that true discipleship is love enacted, Jesus criticizes his beloved friend Martha for doing just that! At the onset of our story Martha is busily engaged in all of the appropriate preparations for her guest, taking pains to extend to him a full measure of hospitality. And, justifiably, she becomes frustrated when she is left alone in the kitchen, her sister choosing to sit at Jesus' feet rather than helping her as she should. When turning to Jesus for help that he might encourage Mary to help her with the chores, he refuses, applauding Mary's choice to sit at his feet and listen to his word rather than take her rightful place alongside her sister in the kitchen.

It is surprising to see Jesus demonstrate such seemingly bad manners – to insult a woman who had so graciously met his needs, to emphasize the one listening rather than the one serving. Martha is the epitome of hospitality. She is the embodiment of the type of household to which Jesus sends the 72 disciples earlier in Luke – the type of household upon which God's peace will rest for their gracious receipt of the disciples and of the Gospel of peace. Hers is the kind of home that invites the kingdom of God into their midst through the welcome of her deeds – and this is the kind of treatment she gets?

Jesus' behavior is surprising – not just to us in our contemporary context but also for those of his day. But his first surprising act is to be received as a guest in the home of a woman in the first place.¹ In the context of Jesus' day, men were only received in households headed by other men, and while John introduces us to Lazarus as Mary and Martha's brother, Luke leaves Lazarus out of the story identifying Martha as the head of the household.

The second surprise Jesus has in store is that of welcoming Mary as a disciple. The posture of sitting at a teacher's feet was one reserved for men in that day, yet Jesus creates the space for her to be counted among his disciples, to hear his teaching and to follow his word. One commentator writes: "Jesus is defending Mary's right to become his disciple and continue her theological studies. The traditional cultural separation between men and women no longer applies."² Just as the Good Samaritan demonstrated true discipleship through acts of kindness, Mary demonstrated true discipleship through hearing God's word. In both stories, the unlikely and outcast are welcomed into the circle of faith, claimed as disciple. Barriers of gender or race are broken down through Jesus' teaching.

While these insights are encouraging, we are still surprised by how Jesus treats Mary. Commentators suggest that it is best to look at this text in light of the parable that precedes it – the text we heard last Sunday when Rev. Bush shared the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus was asked by the rich young man what he must do to inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus teaches that "hearing without doing" is meaningless, that following God means *loving one's neighbor*. If our text for today is taken as a **companion piece**, the message is that "**doing without hearing**" is **missing something too**.³ Service without worship can be hollow as well. The business of the day cannot be so distracting that one misses out on God's presence and message, and doesn't take time to hear God's word. The *doing is necessary*, but not at the expense of **being** with God.

If we think about our churches today, Martha would make a good Presbyterian. She is actively engaged in outreach, she likes to do things decently and in order, she knows how to put together a good meal. And thank God for Martha – and for the Marthas around us – for those who find small and large ways to put their faith into action. **We need "Marthas,"** the do-ers of the church, those with an attention to detail, those for whom no task is too large, those who can make room at the table for everyone, who can identify the needs of others and respond to them in very practical ways. **We need** those who incarnate Christ's love, who put hands and feet to our faith. We need those who teach Sunday school and prepare our annual budget; we need those who make sure that the boiler is running and the newsletter gets out; who coordinates teams to serve dinner in the shelter, who practice our songs for worship and pack health kits for Haiti... **We need to put faith into action.**

¹ Craddock, Fred, *Luke: Interpretation Biblical Commentary*. P 152.

² Bailey, Kenneth, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p 194.

³ Texts for Preaching, Year C. p 437.

But this text is a reminder to us that *hearing precedes doing*. In the midst of our shared ministry together, we need to take the time to sit at Jesus' feet. We need to enter into a quiet space, to still our souls and to open our hearts to God's Spirit. We need to listen.

The listening is essential: for personal spiritual growth that strengthens us for service, and for communal discernment of how to enact God's love in our church, in our community and in our world. If we are to be the people of faith that God is calling us to be, we must stop and listen to God's voice.

On a personal level this charge may seem counter-cultural. Our society is so fast-paced. We are instantly available through cell phones and BlackBerries that both keep the world at our fingertips and keep us at everyone's beck and call. We are busy people – at home, at work, and at church. If nothing else, the economic recession has instilled a fear in our hearts that if we are not *overworking* we might lose the job that provides our health insurance and pays for our kids' clothes. But our worries touch a spiritual level, too. With limited time, we don't want to sacrifice our mission our outreach initiatives and just sit still; with limited energy we want to make sure we lift up the prayers of all who are struggling rather than quiet our hearts and listen. **But the call is for us as individuals – to carve out time each day or each week to center ourselves in prayer, to quiet our hearts and listen, to submit ourselves before study of God's word, to let Jesus our teacher and friend transform our lives and renew our spirits so that we might be strengthened in our service together.**

At a congregational level this charge couldn't be more timely. Together we are engaging in a strategic visioning process where we are seeking God's guidance for our journey together – that our *doing* may be led by our *hearing* of God's word, and that our actions may faithfully respond to God's call. Just last week our Session pulled chairs out from behind our worktables and sat in a circle of community where we prayed, shared, and listened together. We, as a family of faith, are called to listen as we do, to engage in silent prayer together, to submit ourselves before God's word together, to let Christ who is our head transform our community and renew us.

This is a charge we must heed, too, at the denominational level. A week ago our General Assembly concluded its work together – but sent work our way. As a denomination, Presbyteries will be voting in the next two years about changing Constitutional standards on ordination. We have been charged to pray and study more about peacemaking initiatives and about how the church defines of marriage. If we don't stop and listen to God's voice, change will not be possible. If we don't seek God's direction for the future, the future will not be realized.

Just as this passage may challenge us, this is a passage of *invitation*. Embedded in this text is the invitation to follow Christ. Even the least and the unlikely are called, like Mary, to be Christ's disciples – claimed as Christ's own, invited to sit at His feet and hear His word. And for those of us "Marthas" in the room: We are invited to slow down a little, to put important tasks aside, even just for a moment, so that we can be in the presence of the Living God. We are invited: to create space for prayer and for meditation,

to enter into the *being* of our faith even as we engage in the *doing* of our faith. As Fred Craddock writes: “There is a time to go and do; (and) there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be Yes.”⁴

Let us go and do likewise.

Amen.

⁴ Craddock, Fred; *Luke: Interpretation Biblical Commentary* p 152.