

## *Distracted by Many Things*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, (18July), 2010.*

Text: Luke 10:41      “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things....” ~Jesus

Last Sunday in the tent I read and spoke about the parable of the Good Samaritan.<sup>1</sup> That story is placed directly before this morning’s lesson, the story of Mary and Martha. Both stories are only found in Luke, and it is no accident that Luke put them side by side. Luke wanted us to read the two stories together. The stories address people who want to know the meaning of the Kingdom of God and teach us how to live in a relationship with our Creator. And both stories reveal persons who are not seeing the whole picture of discipleship. The first story speaks of the path to eternal life through the twin commandments: the love of God and love of neighbor. Because the lawyer speaking to Jesus asked for clarification on the love of neighbor, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point I made last week is you cannot love God if you are not actively helping and loving your neighbors, even ones you encounter in unexpected places, as the Samaritan found a neighbor on the Jericho road. That parable seems to denigrate the two religionists who passed by on the other side of the road. They are pictured as preoccupied with their ritual service in the Temple, too distracted to stop and help the man who had been attacked by robbers. They were passive, whereas the Samaritan was an active in living out the faith.

Today’s Gospel seems to turn that point made by Jesus in the Good Samaritan on its head. It is an account of Jesus and the twelve stopping in Bethany at the home of some followers—Mary and Martha. From other gospels we know these two had a brother, Lazarus.<sup>2</sup> As was required by hospitality, Martha offered to feed the thirteen (probably unexpected!) guests.<sup>3</sup> While she worked on meal preparation, her sister Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.”<sup>4</sup> Here we have an activist working hard to do what was right, seemingly following the good neighbor instruction of the earlier story. Yet it is not this sister but the other who is praised by Jesus. Mary listened to him, hanging on his every word, but did not help feed the guests. Whoever has fed even three or four unexpected guests, much less thirteen, appreciates Martha’s speech: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”<sup>5</sup> Given the previous story about the importance of *active* helping of neighbor, we might expect Jesus to say, “But, of course! Mary, get up and help. We will talk later.” But instead he commended the *pietism* of Mary and seemed to criticize the *activism* of Martha!

What sense can we make of this, especially considering his point in the Good Samaritan? Jesus said to the activist, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and *distracted by many things*.” This

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>2</sup> Strikingly the brother is not mentioned in this pericope. Odd also to a first century audience, the rabbi is pictured teaching a woman.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:38.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 10:39, the posture of discipleship.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:40.

line is a significant clue to the meaning of the story, especially in its pairing with the previous one. Was he upset with her because she was too busy? After all, someone had to make the lunch and Jesus will eat, too. There is, however, a note of anxiety in Martha's busyness. She is fretting and distracted by it. She is missing the point of her hospitality: *Jesus had come to her home*.

We have seen church members like these sisters. One does everything: sings in the choir, serves on committees, teaches in church school, folds the bulletins— all the tasks that someone has to do to make the church work. Others are more than willing to let that one do too much. Friction occasionally slips out and the worker bee gets cranky, complaining that she is taken for granted. The chores she is busily accomplishes seem all too important and she misses the bigger purpose. What is that real point of church and faith? The Marthas of the church world become so worried about getting all the tasks done that they mislay the good news. The ministerial tasks of the church ought to turn us and others toward the amazing mercy of God, to Jesus' call to us to be disciples, to the great hope of life eternal. But the tasks have a way of becoming ends in themselves. There is a need for *only one thing*, Jesus says.<sup>6</sup> Mary has chosen it. She has chosen to be a disciple of Jesus, to sit at his feet, to heed his instruction, to live as he calls her. Mary has chosen the *one thing*. Still, do you hear this story and worry who will wash the dishes at this impromptu church supper? Who will set the table and prepare the food? How can he say only *one thing* is necessary?

Here we come back to his comment to Martha: "You are worried and distracted by *many things*." Note the contrast to her *many* things and Mary's *one* thing. This is his point. Focus on Jesus and the other stuff will take care of itself, will work out in time. It is not that there are not important things among the *many*. We know there are tasks life requires. But when the tasks become the central point of our lives, we can miss Jesus and the *one* thing. If you put the *one* thing first, the *many* will still get done, and moreover we will not be so distracted, frenzied, stressed about the *many*.

I read a poem this week by Jennie Gordon called *Mary/Martha*. In fact, I liked it so much I duplicated a few copies and put them on the table outside. The voice is Mary's talking about her fascination with Jesus and her sister's anger that she's not helping. The poem ends noting the irony that two sisters in themselves each have something of the other. "I can feel her deep derision/ for my sister is no stranger/ she's the other part of me." Perhaps we all have a bit of Mary and a bit of Martha in our Christian discipleship. What do we make of the confusion inside ourselves?

Prof. Craddock has a comment about the two stories:

Jesus has just met a man skilled in Scripture who has trouble hearing the word of God, and Jesus offers him an example of a Samaritan. Now Jesus visits with a woman so busy she does not hear the word, and Jesus offers her an example, her sister. To the man, Jesus said to go and do; to the woman, Jesus said to sit down, listen and learn.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 10:42.

<sup>7</sup> Craddock, Fred B. Luke. (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1990), 151-2.

As we try to figure this out, it is important to remember Jesus' original conversation with the lawyer about the path to eternal life. There are two keys: "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."<sup>8</sup> As we look at the two sisters we see the irony and complexity of following Jesus. "If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving all together, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever."<sup>9</sup> When we read the story of the Good Samaritan alongside the story of Mary and Martha, we realize there is an element of both needed in true discipleship. There has got to be a time for going out and doing but unless we also spend time in the Word and prayer and solitude, our discipleship becomes distracted, unfocused, out of balance. There has to be time for spirituality but if we never act on our faith we may also miss the one thing needful. True discipleship is not the lawyer *or* the Samaritan, not Martha *or* Mary. True discipleship must contain elements of both: activism in balance with piety, focused on the one thing: the relationship with God.

End

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**See Poem Below**

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:27.

<sup>9</sup> Craddock, *op cit*, 152.

## **Mary/Martha**

Luke 10:38-42

lately I have welcomed  
this creeping seeping quiet  
as if time has kicked her shoes off by the fire  
and I sit  
in endless adoration, cross legged,  
simply waiting  
for the word to rest upon me  
for the candles to be lit

I can sense my sister moving  
through the paces of her longing  
finding meaning in the making of a house  
to call a home  
sweeping up the dust of reason  
working hard at keeping steady  
cleaning, smiling, baking, taking  
little time to call her own

and then Jesus comes to visit  
so I settle down to listen  
take my place as I imagined, lift my face,  
ripe to receive,  
yet her anger clouds my vision  
I can feel her deep derision  
for my sister is no stranger,  
she's the other part of me

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