



July 22, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 10:38-42; 12:31

“Who’s going to get supper on the table if everyone is sitting around listening to Jesus?”

There’s a passage in Scripture that gives a lot of people some trouble. It’s only five verses- which I was surprised to remember as I looked it up again this week. I always think it’s a long story—maybe because it elicits a long train of thoughts and feelings inside me.

It’s a simple story. Jesus was visiting the home of his friends in Bethany- two sisters, Mary and Martha, and one brother, Lazarus. He went there often and developed a close relationship with their family. Mary decided to sit with Jesus and listen to his stories and conversations. Martha was busy trying to get food prepared for the visitors. Martha complained to Jesus that Mary was leaving her to do all the work by herself. I am sure Martha thought Jesus would immediately send Mary to help her. But he didn’t. He told Martha, “You are so worried and distracted by many things—there’s only one thing that really matters, and that’s what Mary has decided to do. No one should take that away from her.”

The Bible doesn’t give us Martha’s response to this, but I think I might have said something like, “Well! Who’s going to get supper on the table if everyone is sitting around listening to Jesus?!!!”

It’s not immediately clear what the message of this story might be! What was Jesus saying? What was this most important thing?

Christian thinkers have said the story teaches us that contemplation is more important than action. They have said it teaches us prayer is more important than

service. But as we ponder this, it doesn't seem consistent with Jesus' own life. He said he himself came to serve, and not to be served.

Continued reflection suggests that it's not Martha's SERVICE that is the problem, it's the WAY she's going about it. She's upset, rushing this way and that, she's anxious about getting it all done. She is, perhaps making things more complicated than they need to be. Rather than putting out things to make sandwiches, she may be whipping up a cheese soufflé, to be accompanied by sautéed new potatoes, seasoned with dill and parsley, to be followed by homemade bread served with a selection of cheeses, to be followed by a rich chocolate mousse with tiny wafer cookies. She's also steeping a delicate tea and planning to draw fresh, cool water from the spring about a quarter mile from their house. (Can you tell I've been dieting since Jan. 15th of this year?)

When I consider Martha's behavior I am truly "CONVICTED OF SIN". Because this is, fairly often, a pattern that I recognize in my own life. During the first three years of our marriage, my husband went through some painful learning experiences. After a few times of bringing someone home for dinner without letting me know first, he began to discover this did not contribute to marital harmony.

We'd have these long conversations where he would tell me no one ever cared what the house looked like; people were just tickled to be invited; it didn't matter if we had a fine meal, or even big quantities of food. I didn't buy it—especially if I had two pork chops cooked with leftover rice and a can of green beans planned for dinner.

I think I'm a little better today about spontaneity and about not thoroughly cleaning the house before a person steps through our door. I think maybe. My family might not agree.

Now, you may be thinking, "Hey, I don't have Ronni's problem! I'm not like that at all!" However, Martha's self-imposed drivenness seems to me like an apt illustration of our lives today. Many of us are stressed and driven about many things- maybe not the state of our homes, or about our menus. We may drive ourselves at school or work. We may drive ourselves at church (!)

Jesus' response to Martha was, I would bet, totally unexpected. She was probably sure he'd send Mary to help her--- for TWO reasons, actually: 1) just to be fair, so Martha didn't have to do all the work alone; and 2) because women weren't really allowed to sit and listen at the feet of a rabbi in Christ's time.

But Jesus pointed Martha back to her own actions instead, pointing out her anxiety and rushing and distraction.

So, the story isn't telling us contemplation is BETTER than action or that prayer is BETTER than service. This story does, however, point to a definite priority for the Christian life. It's telling us that ATTENTIVENESS is more important than DISTRACTION.

IN OUR PRAYER, we can be attentive or distracted.

IN OUR SERVICE to God and others, we can be attentive or distracted.

You see- prayer and contemplation are good and necessary AND action and service are good and necessary—but they BOTH need to be carried out without distractions.

And there is an ORDER to both sides of the Christian life. Prayer and contemplation come FIRST. They aren't better, they just come first. Action/service comes out of our prayer and contemplation. God's message is to listen first, then obey what we hear.

We can only SERVE Christ (who indeed CALLS us to serve, and CAME HIMSELF to serve) once we have ATTENTIVELY received his love and heard his call. Therefore, we MUST learn how to listen in prayer.

How do we do this? Well, we stop speaking in prayer and we rest in silence and let what comes to us come. We have to hush up long enough to hear what God has to say. Trust that God will speak through your thoughts. Marjorie Thompson, writing in the Board of Discipleship's newsletter, puts it this way: *Rest in God's love... If you cannot feel or believe this love, pray for it...Allow your heart to reconnect with...your soul-deep desire for God. If you cannot find this desire, pray for its reality to emerge through all the lesser desires that weigh you down. God longs to bring the freshness of your...heart back to the surface.*

Our ancestor in the faith, Meister Eckhart has this to say:

God is foolishly in love with me. He seems to have forgotten heaven and earth and deity. His entire business is with me...to give me everything to comfort me. He gives it to me suddenly, he gives it to me wholly, he gives it to me perfectly, he gives it to me all the time, and he gives it to all creatures. Why are you not aware of it? Because you are not at home in the soul's inmost center.

The love we receive will always carry us beyond ourselves. We don't need to worry that Mary would continually avoid "work" by listening to Jesus. Christ's

love will never let us REMAIN AT HIS FEET forever. But we will be too overwhelmed, distracted, or busy in a rat-race frenzy if we NEGLECT to listen and receive.

This story lies between two other familiar readings in the Gospel of Luke: the parable of the Good Samaritan, a powerful example of loving service in action, and the story of Jesus teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer. It's as if Luke wants us to understand that acts of mercy are rooted in prayer and listening. Mary's choice connects the parable and the prayer.

A Christian author once said there are basically only two prayers: "Help me, help me, help me", and "thank you, thank you, thank you". Later she discovered a third prayer: "Wow..."

This is what I suggest- when you pause to pray, work through them all. Our first inclination is often to begin with "help me". I'd say, let those urgent "help me"s come first. Name all your troubles and struggles. Let them bubble up- all the worries and anxieties. If you do this until there are no more, you reach a point of rest. Into that quiet often comes your awareness of blessings. These don't come so urgently as the "help me"s, but with time, they come. Name your blessings and say to God, "thank you." Then wait some more. Into that silence you may begin to perceive God's love for you and your heart will, on it's own, say, "Wow." Listen. Be attentive. Listen to what LOVE says to you, where LOVE bids you go. Then go there. Do what God is calling you to do.

To serve Christ without distractions, we must first receive God's love and hear his call.

(Close with guided silent prayer.)