

Luke 10:38-42
"Keep In Touch"
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This text from Luke's gospel, which tells the well-known story of Mary and Martha, has been traditionally interpreted in a few different ways. There are some old "tried-and-true" interpretations of this text that hard to get away from if we're trying to see the text in a new way.

Some interpretations of this story place a great deal of emphasis on the fact that Mary and Martha are women. For instance, this text has been used in ages past to affirm the subservience of women. Jesus seems to applaud Mary's decision to merely sit, and keep her mouth shut, and listen to the man speak. For centuries this text was a held up as a model for how women should behave in a faith environment like church. They should be very quiet and unassuming, and listen to and learn from the men.

Now of course, I think that happens to be a horrible interpretation of the text. I don't think Jesus would have commended the subservience of women, especially considering the prominent role that women played in his ministry and in the life of the early church. Let's not forget that the women who followed

Jesus were often more faithful than his disciples, and at the defining moment of Jesus' earthly ministry - his resurrection - it was the women who came to the tomb and carried the news to others after the men had all run away in fear.

There's also a second interpretation that emphasizes that Mary and Martha were *women*, but it perhaps falls on the opposite end of the spectrum. When Mary chose to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him, she was taking the position of disciple. She was proclaiming with her actions that a woman could be just as good a disciple as a man. Thus, Mary was turning traditional gender roles on their head. She was a feminist before her time, shunning the domestic work that Martha seemed so concerned about in favor of a position of learning and leadership.

That interpretation, I think, is a little better, but I don't see in this text a radical call to feminism that some suggest is there. That's not to say that feminism is a bad thing. It's just not the primary message of this text.

There's also a third popular interpretation of this text that emphasizes the value of contemplative life over an exceedingly active life. From the Middle Ages right on through to our time, this

text was used to call Christians to a contemplative life, a life of peace and prayer set outside the busyness of the world. The Christian here is called to practice his or her faith by following Mary's example of quiet, attentive, study of God's Word. The hectic pace of the world, which is modeled by Martha, is to be left behind.

The problem with this third interpretation is that it ignores the fact that Christians are called to be engaged with the world rather than withdrawn from it. Sitting in some monastery or in your closet meditating on God's Word day and night doesn't cut it. God's Word, in fact, calls us to be God's missional and transformative agents in the world. We change the world. We don't withdraw from it into life centered solely on contemplation.

So where does that leave us? Well, it leaves us looking for a new way to interpret this text. Countless scripture passages have spoken different messages in different times and places, and honest and faithful Christians should always be open to what any given text is saying to them in their day and age. The story of Mary and Martha has a message for us, right here and right now. Our task is to discover that message, and it may sound a little different from the ways that Christians have interpreted this text in the past.

Now, if we are going to understand what this story is saying to us today, we have to first take a look at where this story comes in Luke's gospel. Luke has situated the story of Mary and Martha right after the parable of the Good Samaritan. Traditionally, Christians have seen this as sort of a one-two punch from Luke. The Parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates love of neighbor - that's what the Samaritan did for the man beaten by the robbers - and the story of Mary and Martha illustrates love of God - that's what Mary is doing sitting at Jesus' feet. The Good Samaritan exemplifies love of neighbor. Mary exemplifies love of God. Luke is showing us the importance of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength on the one hand, and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves on the other hand. It's really pretty simple.

The problem with this is that you cannot so neatly separate the two. In the Christian life, they are intertwined, and mixed together. 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. That relationship between loving God and loving neighbor is the target that Luke is trying to hit with both stories.

It's a target that I think we miss when we polarize the actions of Mary and Martha, as if it's a story of good sister vs. bad sister. 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. There is nothing wrong with it, and in fact there is something absolutely essential about showing one's love of God and neighbor by serving, and preparing, and showing hospitality. Martha is doing everything she knows to do to love Jesus in that moment, and preparing that meal of hospitality for him is a good and necessary act of service. The remarkable thing about the story is that Martha tried to serve her Lord without first engaging him, without connecting with the very word of the gospel sitting right there in her living room. Her work and her service are good things, but they are done apart from the living word of God, and there's only so long she can keep that up. Eventually it gets her frustrated, and it wears her down.

Mary is commended because she 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 first depends on hearing and trusting that word.

A few years ago, Tom Friedman wrote a column on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* called "The Taxi Driver".¹ In it he described how he took a cab from Charles de Gaulle Airport to Paris. It turned out to be about a one-hour cab ride, and during that hour he and the driver had accomplished a number of things. Friedman had been riding, listening to his iPod, and working on a column on his laptop. The driver had driven the cab, talked on his cell phone, and even watched a video (which was more than a little nerve-wracking for Friedman). "There was just one thing that we never did," Friedman wrote. "Talk to each other." They didn't connect with each other or relate to each other in any meaningful way.

The truth is that any church, including our congregation here at Philadelphia, is capable of accomplishing a great many things. Think for a moment about all of the work that we do here: Sunday School classes, adult and youth mission trips, retreats at Montreat Conference Center, Room in the Inn, Wonderful Wednesdays, Ministry Team meetings, Session meetings, Deacons meetings,

hospital visitation, visitation to homebound members, weddings, funerals, baptisms, choirs for all ages, Bible Marketplace, Jolly Good Timers, the annual church Bazaar, Homecoming, Rally Day, Presbyterian Women, Presbyterian Men, Stephen Ministry, and of course, worship every Sunday. There are also innumerable other things that I didn't mention, and you know what they are if you've been involved in the life of our church.

All of these things are good things, and even necessary things. But if all of our work and our service is done without intertwined moments of connecting with Jesus, then the work becomes frustrating, and it will wear us down. If our labor in Christ's name does not in some way relate to his very real presence with us right where we are, then it's labor done in vain. Christ comes into our midst in the faces of the poor, the homeless, the grieving, the sick, the lonely, the stranger, as well as the people sharing the pews with you - and if our ministry here at Philadelphia doesn't contain within it a personal relationship with them, and with each other, then we have missed the one thing required of us. We've missed the better part.

I think back to our adult mission trip to Guatemala, which involved building not one, but four Habitat Houses in a week. We worked very hard while we were there, hauling cinder blocks, sifting sand, mixing cement, laying block, and doing everything else that a Habitat House requires. At the end of the week we had built four houses, which was quite an accomplishment, and one that we were immensely proud of. But I think if you asked anyone who went on that trip what the one thing was that was the most vital, and had the greatest effect on us, we wouldn't even consider the work that we did. We'd tell you about those people with whom we worked each day, those living in poverty who needed a house, the children who flocked around us to share food with us and try on our work gloves, and the members of a community who worshiped in a church that was little more than a roof extension on the back of someone's house. Those people are what really mattered, and it was in them that we saw the face of Christ each and every day.

This text from Luke's gospel reminds us of that. It reminds us that we aren't just called to work, and meet, and do for the sake of working, and meeting, and doing. Everything we do is to be oriented around our Lord, our Teacher, Jesus, who comes right into

our midst wherever we are. It's our job to see him, to recognize him, to listen to him, so that our work and our service is simply an extension of our relationship with him, and with others.

Today is a good starting place for that. Jesus has called us all here on this Lord's Day, to come in and come together from the places where we are "worried and distracted by many things", to a place where we are in touch with the one thing needed, the better part that will not be taken away. Here, today, we are blessed to connect with Jesus Christ, the source that gives both guidance and energy to everything we do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Thomas Friedman, "The Taxi Driver," *New York Times*, Nov. 1 2006.