

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor  
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### Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. [39] She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. [40] But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." [41] But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; [42] there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

### WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

What would Jesus do? Several years ago many people wore bracelets with the letters WWJD inscribed on it to remind themselves of that question. That's a hard question to answer in some cases. For example, take our lesson for today.

If you didn't have the ending to this story would you have guessed what Jesus did? I wouldn't. Remember last week's story, the Parable of the Good Samaritan? What was the gist of that story? It's more important to do the right thing than have the correct theology. What would Jesus do? Jesus would do something. Jesus would be active. Jesus would serve.

And so, now we come to the very next story in the Gospel of Luke. And what we learned last week seems to be turned on its head.

A woman named Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. Martha does what any good host would do. She begins serving the others. In fact she becomes totally immersed in this task.

But, her sister, Mary is not so worried about being a good host. Mary sits quietly at the feet of Jesus, and listens to him. In Jesus' day the spot at the Master's feet was usually reserved for a male disciple. But, Mary feels comfortable in this role reversal.

Martha, on the other hand, does not feel so comfortable. In fact, she is distraught by the fact that Jesus is allowing this to happen. Any other teacher of that day would have said something like, “Don’t you know that a woman’s place is in the kitchen? Go help your sister.” But, Jesus didn’t say a word.

So Martha decides to give Jesus some words, “Don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all my work? Tell her to help me.”

What would Jesus do? What should Jesus do?

Maybe Jesus should agree with Martha and reassure her. “You’re right Martha. We’re closer to God when we’re serving than when we’re just sitting and listening. Go help your sister Mary.”

One commentator suggested that Jesus might surprise everyone by preparing the meal himself and let Martha take a rest. That would fit in with what he did in the upper room at the Last Supper ... taking a towel and washing his disciples’ feet. This would have been another excellent opportunity to elevate the importance of service.

## THE PROBLEM ... WHAT JESUS DID

There are many things that Jesus could have done or should have done, at least in our opinion. But, it’s what he does that makes this little story controversial. Jesus seems to take Mary’s side in the dispute.

He gently chides Martha. He says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. But, only one thing is essential. Mary has made the better choice.”

I’ve always said that we often treat the Bible like a Rorschach test. As people project their thoughts and feelings on to the shape of those amorphous ink blots, so we often project our thoughts and feelings upon the stories of the Bible. This is especially true with this story.

Some of you know what it’s like to be stuck in the kitchen cleaning the dishes when everyone else is enjoying conversation in the living room. You may

have even gone into the living room and tried to shame someone into helping you.

All of you know a neurotic housewife who cleans constantly as a way of avoiding meaningful conversation with anyone. And sometimes this “cleanliness is next to godliness” person tries to make you feel guilty about your slovenly ways. “Don’t bother me about doing the dishes now Martha. I’m preparing my sermon. That’s more important.”

## A SCHOLARLY MISINTERPRETATION

The temptation, especially with this story is to interpret it strictly through the lens of our experience. I learned this past week that even Biblical scholars are not exempt from this problem.

For example, one feminist commentator wondered out loud if this is Luke’s way of putting down women who have been exercising too much authority in the early church. She suggested that this is why Luke tells this story.

Luke puts these words on the lips of Jesus who criticizes Martha because she is active and working and in charge. And he praises Mary who is passive and silent. Luke is trying to put women in their obedient and silent place.

Heaven knows that many church leaders have done that sort of thing and some who continue to do that sort of thing. But, I think it’s a stretch to say that this is what Luke is trying to do.

In Luke’s gospel women are never passive and silent. They are prominent, articulate disciples. And, you’ll remember that when Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened, she was taking a position that was normally reserved for a man.

Since Jesus approved of Mary’s action, surely we can’t say that this is some sort of nefarious attempt to put down women. To the contrary, this could even be seen as a way to increase the status of women. He was saying through this action, “If Mary can sit at my feet, you can too.”

DON’T YOU CARE?

And yet, though we can rejoice with Mary's choice, and Jesus' affirmation of men and women, I think that many of us have a tendency to be too hard on Martha.

All of us know people who neurotically serve others to the point that they can't hear or see anything else. And there is a temptation when we preach on this passage to lampoon Martha's busy ways unfairly and make her into a modern neurotic housewife.

The temptation is to portray Martha as a kind of overwrought bumbling figure, much like Lucy Ricardo from the old "I Love Lucy" comedy shows. If I were to take that approach this morning, some of you would roar with laughter, and some of you would cringe in pain and anger.

Like Martha you might ask me,  
"Don't you care that I serve? Don't you care that I do the work no one else wants to do?"

Hear me on this. I want to say clearly that I do care, and Jesus cares.

I do care about those of you who always seem to be the first into the kitchen to wash the dishes. I do care about those of you who make sure that the church is repaired and the air conditioning is working. I do care about those of you who count the money and type the bulletin and do all those other things that are necessary but not always appreciated.

I do care about those of you who prepare a salad so that the homeless might be fed. I do care about those of you who hold a bake sale in order to raise money for missions. If we didn't have people like Martha in the church, we would be lost.

But, our service should never prevent us from hearing God's Word as revealed in Jesus. We must have a healthy balance between hearing the word and doing the word. Either one alone can be deadly.

BURNOUT

I'm on the Committee on Ministry. That's the Committee in the Presbyterian Church that tries to help churches and ministers who are struggling. And sometimes they struggle for the same reason. Churches and ministers alike struggle and burn out because they get so busy doing things that they forget the larger vision.

It's good to do something for the kingdom, to serve the homeless a meal or put up sheetrock for Habitat for Humanity. Doing something is a necessary part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

But, we also need to have a larger vision. Someone once said, "If you don't have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can't get up every day to work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down."

I have met many people who have been beaten down by a life of service. I have met many people like Martha who have begun to find their service and work in the church to be distracting and anxiety provoking. Instead of feeling happy about what they do, they feel angry. They wonder out loud why those "new people" aren't as committed.

Serving is no longer a blessing. Serving keeps them from hearing the words of Jesus.

Sometimes people do too much. Sometimes people out of a sense of duty or guilt or an attempt to earn their own salvation always say "yes" when someone asks them to serve. And then they resent the service.

If someone comes to me and says that they're worn out by their service in the church, I never try to cajole them into serving more and more ... even though I might think that church could use the service.

Instead, I try to help them refocus their energy and regain their vision. I ask them, "When was serving a less onerous task? When did you feel fulfilled spiritually? When did that change?"

Sometimes they can't answer those questions. Sometimes they are so burned out by the service that they want to "retire" permanently. Sometimes church

members and ministers even leave the church because service becomes a burden instead of a joy.

## THE RIGHT MOTIVE

And yet there are others who serve constantly, and yet never seem to tire of their service. What makes the difference? It's not how much we do that makes a difference. It's our reason for service that makes all the difference.

So what should our motive for service be? Are we trying to serve enough so that God will love us more? Are we serving because if we don't do it no one else will? Are we trying to impress others?

If you answered yes to any of those things, you have scored high on the potential burn out scale. Those reasons for serving aren't good enough. Those reasons can make anxious and distract us from what we really need to be doing. Those reasons for serving can even prevent us from hearing the words of Jesus.

So what is the right reason for serving? There is only one and that reason is gratitude. We sometimes call it grace.

## THE POWER OF THE GRACIOUS WORD

When Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, what words did she hear? We don't know for sure, but it was probably something like, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

What was Jesus saying? What did the words of Jesus mean? Jesus tells us that when we serve in his name we are doing more than just cleaning up or feeding some hungry people. We are part of a larger Kingdom, the Kingdom of God.

It is the Word of Jesus that gives us this vision. When we hear the words of Jesus, service is transformed. It is the Word that gives us the strength to tend the sick, feed the hungry and comfort the bereaved. Instead of dragging us

down, instead of making us anxious and distracted, service empowered by the Word deepens our faith.

We believe that God is at work in the world to feed, heal and comfort others. And so what we do to serve others counts for something because we are a part of God's team.

We know that we don't deserve the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus, but that grace enables us to be a gracious people. It enables us to give without expecting anything in return.

It enables us to let others see Jesus in us, and it enables us to see Jesus in others.

## MISSION TRIP TO JAMAICA

A minister took a youth group on a mission trip to Jamaica. They visited a local elementary school and spent some time observing a classroom that was seriously overcrowded with children.

Most of the children were very poor. All of them were needy and wriggly and noisy and unruly. It was a difficult and sometimes chaotic learning environment.

But, the young people were amazed by the teacher. She carried herself with great calm and patience. She treated all the children with love and respect, despite the difficult circumstances. They decided that the only way she could do this was that she must really love teaching.

But, they were surprised to hear her say, "Oh I don't come here every day mainly because I love teaching. I come here every day because I love Jesus, and I see Jesus in every one of these children."

This teacher, Like Mary had spent some time at the feet of Jesus. And because she had heard the life giving Word she was able to get up like Martha and serve ... serve not out of anxiety and compulsion but out of joy and gratitude. She was able to see the face of Jesus in every child she served.

## KEEP THE FLAME BURNING

Why do you do the things that you do? Do you do them out of fear? Do you do them out of guilt? Or are you so anxious about the world that you are paralyzed from doing anything ... retreating into your own private world?

Among the ancient Greeks, when the races were run each contestant carried a torch. The winner of the race was not the person who crossed the finish line first. The winner was the one who crossed finish line in the least time with his torch still burning.

Many of us have had a hard time keeping the flame burning. In our effort to rush and win the race, we have somehow forgotten the object of the game. Our accomplishments don't bring us the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment that we thought that would. Sometimes we get everything we thought we wanted, and yet it isn't enough.

All of us from time to time need to re-evaluate and refocus. Life can become a compulsive habit instead of a joyful adventure.

This passage teaches us that Jesus does not want us to serve in this way. Jesus wants us to hear a Word of grace so joyous and amazing that our whole perspective on the world changes. Jesus wants us to choose the better way. And this passage teaches us that when we sit at the feet of Jesus, we have indeed chosen the better way.

E. Stanley Jones once said, "Yourself on you own hands is a problem and a pain; yourself in the hands of God is a possibility and a power." That was the difference between Martha and Mary. Martha felt like everything depended upon her chicken dinner. It became a problem and a pain. Mary, on the other hand, apparently saw the power and possibility that came from sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Don't misunderstand. The service will come. The story of the Good Samaritan tells us that the service must come. But, it will be service based upon the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

COULD BE JESUS

A student worked as a volunteer in a Jesuit home for the poor. He and the priests worked all day, every day handing out food, ministering to human need as best they could. The work was draining both physically and emotionally.

One particularly difficult, long day was drawing to a close. The student and an old Jesuit priest had finally taken care of the last person in need and were pushing the big oak door closed for the night. At that moment they looked out and saw yet one more forlorn soul shuffling his way up the sidewalk toward the center.

The student looked out at the man shuffling toward them, thought about how tired he was and then took the Lord's name in vain. He muttered, "Jesus Christ."

And without missing a beat, the old priest said, "Could be, could be. We had better open the door."

Don't let yourself become distracted and worried by the details of life. Only one thing is necessary. Each day we listen for Jesus. You'll never know where you'll find him. So go ahead and open the door.

Open the door to your heart. Silent all those anxious voices, and listen to him alone.

Amen.