

Luke 10:38-42

## THE BALANCED LIFE

Dr. William Barclay once said: “Here we see what might be called *the rhythm of the Christian life*. For the Christian life is a continuous going into the presence of God from the presence of (people), and coming out into the presence of (people) from the presence of God.” (Commentary to Mark’s Gospel, pg. 156)

As we live our Christian lives “coming and going” -- going into the presence of God, then coming out into the presence of others, and back and forth, on and on – that’s precisely when we achieve the balanced life within our Christian walk. If you were here last week when Jenny preached on Jesus’ command to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind; and our neighbor as ourselves (followed by Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan), then this sermon will sound like an echo or at least Part Two of her sermon.

Jenny talked about following God’s priorities in our lives, and today’s lesson, which follows on the heels of the passage from last week, helps us to identify further what those priorities look like within the Christian life. As Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, we are called *to be* and *to do*. When we value both being and doing in response to God’s grace, then we are living the balanced life, and that in turn brings us meaning, joy, peace, and fulfillment.

For centuries, Martha has gotten bad press because of her response to Jesus when he and his disciples visited in their home. We can’t tell from the text whether their visit was anticipated or if they had simply shown up at the door -- surprise! Furthermore, we learn earlier in this chapter of Luke’s Gospel that seventy other disciples had returned to Jesus following their successful mission trip. Thus, it’s one thing if Jesus and the Twelve showed up at Martha and Mary’s home; it’s quite a different matter if the seventy other disciples tagged along with Jesus and the Twelve!

At any rate, while sister Mary sat at Jesus’ feet, which was the typical position of students showing respect to their teacher, Martha was “slaving away” in the kitchen. Mary chose to be with Jesus, to listen to and for the word of God, while Martha’s choice was to do something so that her guests were comfortable and well fed. Martha had had enough! She approached Jesus and said, “Master, don’t you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand.” Jesus replied by telling Martha that she was making too big a fuss: “You are worried and distracted by many things.” Jesus went on to tell Martha that Mary had “chosen the better part, or the main course, and that won’t be taken away from her.”

In this exchange, we learn a couple of things. It may well be that Martha was working way too hard to put a sumptuous feast of many dishes on the table for her guests. While her efforts would have been greatly appreciated by Jesus and the others, Jesus reminded her that a little would go a long way, and that it wasn’t necessary for her to go to such lengths -- especially if it resulted in her being overworked, stressed out, and resentful of the choice Mary had made to sit and listen to Jesus. Also, this story follows Luke’s editorial comment found in Luke 9: 51 that Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem. Jesus was on his way to the cross and to his death. In light of that reality, it was better for Mary (and Martha!) to sit and listen to Jesus.

Jesus, however, did not rebuke Martha for her choice to do what she thought was right. Granted, she might have gotten carried away in her zeal, but it was the response that Martha chose to make at that moment to Jesus and his disciples. It’s important to hear this passage along

side of the passage Jenny preached from last week. Mary's choice was *to be* -- to listen to Jesus and in that way she expressed her priority to love God with every fiber of her being. At the same time, Martha chose *to do* -- to meet the physical needs of her guests; she was motivated by a strong desire to love her neighbors. Both responses were important within that setting.

In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan the emphasis is on action and the spiritual value of doing. In this story of Mary and Martha the value of being is upheld. Both being and doing are called for in the balanced Christian life. Being and doing are not mutually exclusive of one another. Rather, they are integrally related to each other. In the lesson for today, Jesus engaged both sisters, though differently, and he gave them both the benefit of his teaching and his presence. I think Luke wants us to see both sisters as two complimentary and necessary aspects of Christian discipleship. Jesus loved both Mary and Martha and each sister showed her love for Jesus in different ways, and both ways are essential for a balanced and faithful following of Jesus.

Sister Mary reminds me of a story about a man who was trying to read the evening newspaper after he had come home from a rough day at the office. As he attempted to read the paper, his children were constantly interrupting him. One child came and asked for money for an ice cream cone, and his father gently reached into his pocket and gave him the necessary coin. Another child arrived in tears. Her leg was hurt and she wanted her daddy to kiss her leg and make it feel better. An older son came with an algebra problem, and the father and son eventually arrived at the right answer. Finally, the last and youngest of them all burst into the room looking for good old dad. The father said cynically, "And just what do you want?" The little girl said, "Oh, daddy, I don't want anything. I just want to sit on your lap."

This illustration reminds us that there are times to simply be in the presence of the One, who loves us the most. Psalm 46 speaks to our hectic lives when we hear God say to us: "Be still, and know that I am God!" A very significant part of the Christian life is to sit with God, to take time out of our busy, over-scheduled days and simply be in the very presence of God -- like Mary did.

I need to hear and heed Mary's chosen part because, in the past, I have been too much like Martha -- all caught up with the going and doing and moving from one thing to the next. After all, one of my personal mottoes is: "Plan your work and work your plan!" Mary reminds us to slow down, take it easy, and make more time for God in our lives. I still remember the words of an older mentor, who said, "If we are too busy to pray, then we are simply too busy!" After all, God loves us and wants us to nurture our relationship with God, to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

The past year and a half has been a difficult time in my life and our family's life for a number of reasons. More and more, I have felt the need and found my way into God's loving embrace, and God was always there for me to hold me and help me further down the road of life. Sometimes, we just need to be with the Lord -- nothing more, nothing less. And, God will not disappoint!

Then, there are times when we need to express our Christian faith by doing. The call to love God and neighbor implies more than a warm, fuzzy feeling on our part; we are called to action. God's grace always leads us to do good works. The Apostle James put it this way: "So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead."

I'm reminded of the story about a student, who was working during the summer as a volunteer in a Jesuit home for the poor in the center of one of our nation's most blighted cities. They worked all day, every day, handing out food, ministering to human needs as best they

could. One particularly difficult, long day was drawing to a close. The student and an old Jesuit priest finally took care of the last person in need and were pushing the big oak door closed for the night when 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 slowly walking toward them, thought of how tired he was, and muttered, "Jesus...." The old Jesuit said, "Could be, could be. "We had better open the door."

Luke's story of Jesus' encounter with Mary and Martha reminds us that we could amend the wise words of Ecclesiastes and say: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to *be*, and a time to *do*..." It's not an either/or but a both/and. It really is a matter of what is called for and when (at the appropriate or right time). We are called to listen to God's Word and then act on the Word by going to work and doing what is necessary to love God and neighbor. Here's what a balance of being and doing within the Christian life can sound like and achieve.

The master storyteller, Dr. William H. Willimon, said: "A pastor in Florida told me of how her congregation became concerned about the plight of the homeless in her city. They could see them wandering the streets at night, sleeping in doorways. 'We've got this big fellowship hall downstairs,' she told her congregation. 'Why don't we simply invite these homeless men to come spend the night here?'"

The first night, fifty-five homeless men entered the fellowship hall to spend the night. She said, "Now you take fifty-five homeless men off the streets and put them into a Methodist fellowship hall, you've got problems. First of all, we found out that there's a reason why many of them are homeless. Nobody wants them. Crazy, sick, offensive, malnourished, addicted. We had never actually met any homeless people. It was rough at first. Fights. A robbery. Somebody came down to distribute food one night and got roughed up. It was a mess. All we wanted to do was to be nice to some homeless men."

"So what happened," I asked. "So what happened was -- we actually became a church. "We had two choices. "Either throw them out or else do what was necessary to be the sort of place that could show hospitality to fifty-five homeless people. "By the grace of God, we chose the latter. "Medical care, food, counseling, support, hand-holding, and listening were developed. Our congregation was converted from a friendly, ordinary, religious club, protecting its club house, to a committed, bold church, cause when we opened our doors to fifty-five homeless men, guess who else got in with them?"

"The one who said, "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these (Surprise!), you've done it to me?"" I replied. "Right!" she said.

That is being and doing at its best, working in harmony to love and serve both God and our neighbors. Our Session is exploring how we can be and do what God desires. We are taking time to be in the presence of the Lord and to listen for God to guide us in the way that we are to go. Then, and only then, we will get busy and go to work in the community as an expression of our balanced life, seeking to be and to do, to love God and neighbor. Please keep the Session in your prayers as we strive to discern God's will through prayer and study; and please keep an open heart and mind as the Session shares with the congregation the vision God gives us as to how we act on our faith. Then, in the words of scripture and sermon last week, let us go and do likewise.

I want to conclude by wondering out loud as to how Luke's story might end. It may be that, after everyone finished the supper that Martha had prepared, Mary quietly got up and did the dishes, while Martha lingered at the table with Jesus and listened quietly and deeply as he

spoke. Or, perhaps after supper, Martha returned to the kitchen, followed by Jesus, who probably picked up a towel (as he was known to do) to dry the dishes after Martha washed them; this time, Martha got to listen in as Jesus shared with her concerning the kingdom of God. One thing is for certain: Luke's story is open ended, which is to say that we are invited, drawn into the story to live out our own lives and write our own ending. May we come into the loving presence of God so that we can be better prepared to go out and serve our neighbors in love, in the name of Jesus Christ -- all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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