

Choose What Is Better
July 18, 2010
Luke 10:38-42

³⁸As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

This is the Word of God, and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

O God, our heavenly Creator, who's Son Jesus Christ enjoyed rest and refreshment in the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany: Give us the will to love you, open our hearts to hear you, and strengthen our hands to serve you in others for Christ's sake; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Almighty God, our heavenly Creator, whose Son blessed by his presence the home of Lazarus and Mary and Martha in Bethany: grant that, like Martha, we may serve Christ faithfully in the person of our brothers and sisters; and that, like Mary, we may feed on his Word and grow in his love and grace; and that, like Lazarus, we may be brought forth from death to new life in him; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen.

During the past few weeks we have been discussing discipleship and its many forms. Most importantly, as we have defined it, our call to *go* and proclaim the Word of God to all those we encounter. If we narrow our understanding of discipleship to just this one word – *go* – then we would be hard pressed this morning to find any connection to discipleship in this story. But what do you think about today’s story? Is it a story of discipleship? (Pause, encourage, prompt). I think so. Last week’s reading was a call to action. The story of the Good Samaritan reminded us that words alone are not always enough. We can tell people all day long about the love of God in our lives and the importance of relationship with the Risen Savior, but if people do not see our words in action; our willingness to serve, then our words fall on deaf ears. Last week’s reading served as a segue for us in the since that it provided for us not only the realization that discipleship is more than just telling others about what Christ has done for us and the call to action that knowing Christ demands of us, but it also speaks to us about choices that we are to make and decisions that are to be made.

I have often referred to literary works when offering illustrations for our weekly readings. So much so that if you didn’t know I was a mathematician by trade, you would almost believe me to be an English professor. It is important that in all we do in life, we keep ourselves well read; well educated and knowledgeable about the world in which we live. This includes a basic working knowledge of mathematics, the social sciences, and language and just to top things off, a few street smarts. I am probably not as familiar as I should be with the great writers of our time, but there is one Poet whose writings have inspired me on more than one occasion. The Poem, *The Road Less Traveled*, by Robert Frost is one that should be familiar to most high school students, but I am not sure that the true essence of the poem is ever really grasped at that age. Listen to the following lines of this poem:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh – Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads
diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all
the difference*

The poem speaks about a person at a crossroads. The traveler is deciding between two paths that lay before him – “which one should I take”, he asks himself. How often have we found ourselves in similar situations in our lives, forced to make a decision about where we should go or what we should do? One road was well-worn and often traveled, while the other was overgrown and, as he puts it, "wanted wear." I find it interesting that this traveler takes the time to assess the situation and to think about his choice. If only we should do the same in our daily lives; stop acting on impulse and think about the choices we are making. If only our young people today would do the same. For our traveler, the choice was significant and seemingly final, for he sighs, "Yet knowing how way leads to way, I doubted if I should ever come back." Even with the best of intentions to come back and do things differently in the future, our traveler understands that it isn't likely that life in all its business; its hustle and bustle will afford us the opportunity to do so. What I am saying is this, we may believe that the choices we make are insignificant at best and that we have plenty of time to go back and pick up where we left off, but life teaches us that our choices are much more significant and long lasting that we would like to admit; even to ourselves.

I had a physics professor in college who used to tell us often that we should work hard while we are young because we have the rest of our lives to enjoy the benefits and pleasures of this world. To me, this goes right along with the old adage that “youth is wasted on the young.” I have spent a good portion of my life working hard, and so have many of you, but there comes a time when we must stop and look at what it is we are working to gain and most especially, who it is we are working for. Are we working for ourselves and our own satisfaction? If so, then

maybe, like Martha, we have missed out on experiencing some of the benefits and pleasures of life in the now. It is ok to set aside some time today, free from the responsibilities and obligations of our worldly teachings and take advantage of something more; a something that is in the eyes of the world a *road less traveled*.

Allow me to revamp for just a moment. In our reading today we have two sisters who are busily at work serving their guest. We know that both sisters are involved in the preparations because we are told that Mary *left* Martha to do the work alone. The only way Mary could have left Martha is for Mary to have been actively involved with her in the beginning. Some church leaders take the opportunity here to teach us that Mary was good and Martha was bad, but Christ does not make that distinction and neither should we. It should be obvious to us that both Martha and Mary deeply loved Jesus. Both of them expressed their love and their faith in their service of Jesus. Both of them expressed their love and their faith by being a host of Jesus and his followers.

We've already stated that last week's reading, The Parable of the Good Samaritan, calls us to an active faith; an active love. Christian life is a life of faith expressed in works and this is a call for us to show our love and our faith by serving others. We are called to minister to the physical needs of others in the name of Christ. But far too often we leave Christ out of the equation. We get so caught up in serving others that we begin to miss the bigger picture. Our service in Christ becomes an attitude of self-service. Consider the following illustration, "A farmer was single and wanted a wife. His Newspaper ad read: "Man 35 wants woman about 25, with tractor. Send picture of tractor." Christ calls us, like Martha and Mary, to serve others but we are to be careful to stay focused on the outward look – not the inward look.

Jesus did not condemn Martha for serving. He did, however, caution her about being so distracted with serving that she neglected “what is better.” Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better . . .” (vv. 41 – 42a)

What does Jesus mean by this? What is Jesus saying to her and in turn saying to us? Martha's emphasis was on being a host of Jesus. Mary's emphasis was on being a guest of Jesus. Though it may seem a bit ambiguous, we should note that both are necessary. Being busy for the sheer sake of serving others can destroy a person. Being busy with this or that can kill a person, if not physically than spiritually. Putting all of your emphasis on being a host can wear you out; cause you to become frustrated. This is what happens when we, like Martha, become too busy to listen to Jesus; when we forget to stop and breathe and be still and know that God's time is not necessarily our time. So Jesus says, “Martha, Martha . . . [substitute your own name here] . . . only one thing is needed.” For Mary, that one thing was being a guest of Jesus. For many of us we have become so consumed with serving others and doing what the world expects of us that we have forgotten to simply be his guest; we have forgotten to sit at the feet of Jesus and to listen to God's voice and call in our lives.

[Movie Clip from City Slickers: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1bTe54j6PQ&feature=related>]

Curley: *You city folks. -- You spend 50 weeks a year getting knots in your rope and you think two weeks here will work them all out. You just don't get it. All that's important in life is that one thing.*

Mitch: *What thing?*

Curley: *That's what you have to figure out.*

Well, Mary had that one thing figured out. She knew she had to spend time with the Lord. She knew she had to be his guest. What is that one important thing for you this morning? Like Mary, I believe that for many of us it is being a guest of Jesus. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important than being Jesus' guest. Absolutely nothing else is as important as this. A productive farm or dairy, a new car, a fulfilling job, an immaculate house, happy guests, a booming business, a relaxing vacation, invigorating exercise, a winning basketball season, a handsome boyfriend or beautiful girlfriend, high grades – all of these are very important in life but they are unimportant next to Christ Himself. Remember what Jesus said? What good is there to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for? (Mark 8:36-37, MSG)

"Only one thing is needed." Knowing Jesus, listening to Him, being His guest, is the only really important thing in life; everything else is, or should be, secondary. It is my prayer for each of you to take some time this week to be a guest at the feet of Jesus. Revel in his teachings; listen for the Word of God in your lives and come to know your Savior intimately. All else will, and believe me when I say *it will*, fall into place. Amen.

(Special thanks to Reverend Adrian Dieleman of Trinity CRC for some of the ideas used in today's sermon)