

Too Harried? Stop! Listen! Revel! Just Be!

July 22, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Luke 10:38-42

Sermon Notes included in Worship Bulletin:

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.”

Over the last two thousand years, these two verses have invited a number of different interpretations – in part from the translation for original Biblical languages. Earlier translations of the Bible, whose interpreters did not have the benefit of more recently discovered manuscripts, gave credence to a teaching that “it is more important to attend to Jesus’ teaching than to be concerned for matters of food and drink.” Later, it was argued, the meaning was that the most important thing is “concern for the spiritual life.” With the benefit of a wider array of ancient manuscripts, most scholars today take a hard look at the word “many” and interpret Jesus as saying that “Martha had planned too lavish an entertainment ... that simple hospitality would have sufficed – one thing is needful.”

The bottom line for us today is that we, like Mary, recognize what we need more than anything else: to, at least on occasion, stop, listen to and for God, revel in God’s blessings and know that each of us is a precious child of the Almighty God.

Time With the Younger Disciples

Talked just a little bit about Mary and Martha and what would happen when Jesus went to peoples’ homes to visit – that often He (Jesus) would be offered some food. Prompted to do so, Ian Unson asked me if I (Ralph) was hungry. To the “I am always hungry” response, Ian said he would get me some bread to eat – and then proceeded to make the point of “too lavish an entertainment” by walking back and forth to the rear of the sanctuary for a small table, followed, in turn, by a tablecloth, a plate, a napkin, a cup, and finally a knife. In the end, he brought no bread. (!) While that ensued, the younger disciples and I discussed what it was like to listen to Jesus’ stories – and Ian *wasn’t* listening because he, like Martha, was too busy putting on a nice table.

Hymn – “Take My Life and Let It Be”

How do we define ourselves? How often we meet someone and after a few moments we may know their name, but we know their vocation, where they live, perhaps their education, in this time of the year of what their summer plans consist, and if they are parents, of how many different activities their children partake.

The question for today is: how far into a conversation with a new-found friend, does one hear about faith? At what point does one hear about church – about Christ – about what it means to be a follower of Christ, a Christian? And, pray tell, what *does* it mean, to be a Christian, a follower of the Good News as found in God through Christ?

The hymn we just sang correctly suggests that to be a Christian means to give ones

- Life
- Moments
- Days
- Hands
- Feet
- Voice
- Lips
- Treasure (silver and gold)

The first four verses say much about what we are about as people of God – our stewardship of time, talent and treasure – all that we are, giving back to God because of God’s gift of the Redeemer Jesus the Christ.

But that hymn is incomplete, as would be our faith, were it not for the poignancy of the two final verses –

Take my will, my heart, my love, my “self.”

It is true that sometimes we get caught up in the time-honored question of defining who we are as Christians by what we believe *or* by the works we do on God’s behalf. While it is certainly true that if one loves God one is, by definition, going to want to do for others on behalf of God, the faith/works debate is *not* like the proverbial chicken and egg question. Believing comes first. In the reformed tradition of the Christian faith, we unabashedly confess that to believe means to care for others and do for them, but our belief in Jesus as the Christ is at the core of who we are.

The passage of Scripture for this coming Camping Weekend parallels that truth, for in 1 John 4:19, we read, “We love, because he first loved us.” God’s love is first and foremost. Whatever we do, whatever we accomplish on behalf of the Almighty, be it feeding the hungry at soup kitchens, the work projects of the Junior and Senior High youth, mission trips to Jamaica, Mexico, Guatemala, Hungary or South Africa, yard sales, church dinners – we need to make sure that when we think of *who we are* that we don’t fall into the trap of defining ourselves by what we do before defining ourselves by *who we are* – children of the most High Creating God, redeemed through Christ’s love and sacrifice and empowered by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Martha, a wonderful host, fell into that trap which Ian helped me illustrate this morning in our Time With Our Younger Disciples. Martha got so caught up in what she felt she *needed* to do – and do so lavishly so as to not miss part of her *tasks* – that she missed out on what was most important – namely being in Jesus’ presence. Martha loved Jesus – as a friend, as the Messiah, perhaps as a teacher. It was as though she lived her life singing the first stanzas of our hymn – and she felt as though she were faithful in giving of her life, moments, days, hands, feet, voice, lips and treasure.

But it was Mary who in her just being “sang” the last two stanzas –

Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart, it is Thine own;

It shall be Thy royal throne – it shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love; my LORD I pour at Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee. - Ever, only, all for Thee.

“At Thy feet.” It was at Jesus’ feet that Mary sat – traditionally a place for men – suspecting if not knowing that He would not be around much longer, that His three years of ministry was all there was to His earthly presence. Yes, the story is about Martha getting so caught up in all of her tasks, in presenting a lavish and well presented meal, indeed worrying about whether enough had been done – and expressing frustration that Mary was not doing her part – that she lost sight of what was important. But this is more a story about Mary, who reminds us of what comes first – and that when we gather in this place, that we remember our first task – to know the love of God – that we might, in turn, know what it means to love God back – and to also love all of God’s people.

The lesson for today comes from our reading from the Gospel of Luke – but look at how the two quotes in our worship bulletin echo that message: Paul Tillich’s words, “The first duty of love is to listen,” could well have been Mary’s reply to Martha. And was Jesus not telling Martha to stop worrying about the lavish entertainment – echoed by John Haggai’s “worry is an intrusion into God’s providence?” That is an admonition all of us need to hear. Those of us who have learned the art of turning molehills into mountains [raising my hand in acknowledgement] could take a lesson from that. Perhaps all of us need the words of the sermon title that comprise my paraphrase of Jesus’ response to Martha: “Too Harried? Stop! Listen! Revel! Just Be!”

So perhaps the lesson for today is that we take a break from emphasizing all that we do and remember first and foremost all that we are:

- Brothers and sisters in faith
- Beloved children of God
- People who are special in the eyes of the Creator
- Believers who know that we are redeemed of Christ
- Faithful followers who listen for the voice of God in the present age, that of the Holy Spirit, that not only directs us in what we will do, but reminds us, daily, of who we *are*.

“Too Harried? Stop! Listen! Revel! Just Be!”

Amen.