

“Following Up the Welcome”  
Smyrna United Church of Christ  
July 18, 2010  
Sermon by Katherine Raley

**Luke 10:38-42**

10:38 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."

“In a field one summer's day a Grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart's content. An Ant passed by, bearing along with great toil an ear of corn he was taking to the nest. "Why not come and chat with me," said the Grasshopper, "instead of toiling and moiling in that way?" "I am helping to lay up food for the winter," said the Ant, "and recommend you to do the same." "Why bother about winter?" said the Grasshopper; we have got plenty of food at present." But the Ant went on its way and continued its toil. When the winter came the Grasshopper had no food and found itself dying of hunger, while it saw the ants distributing every day corn and grain from the stores they had collected in the summer. Then the Grasshopper knew: It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.”

Alright, so in Aesop’s Fable of the hardworking Ant and the lazy Grasshopper, there’s a different “moral of the story” than the story of Mary and Martha in the Bible. In the Biblical story, the relaxed grasshopper, Mary, is rewarded, while the hardworking ant, Martha, is reproached. The seeming moral to this story is that sometimes the work needs to be put down, and the task at hand is simply to listen. In other Gospel stories, we find a similar lesson – rejoice while the bridegroom is with you, because he won’t be there forever (Matthew 9:15, Mark 2:19, Luke 5:34). Take advantage of being able to listen to Jesus while you can, in this story of Martha’s hard work. Sometimes it gets confusing, though, because in other Biblical lessons, it seems like we are being told to work hard, stay alert, so that we will be ready for the bridegroom coming again (Matt. 25). So which is it? Are we to be the grasshopper, or the ant?

**If we look at this story about Jesus, Mary, and Martha closely, I think that we will find that the answer is *not* one or the other. It is not necessary for a Christian disciple to be Mary and only Mary, or Martha and only Martha – either the grasshopper or the ant.**

**Fortunately for us, Christian discipleship is about embracing both of these *parts* of following Jesus. Sometimes we must be the grasshopper, enjoying what we have in front of us, stopping to listen, and sometimes we must be Martha, working for God’s kingdom. Both of them are welcoming Jesus, but we must find the right part for the right time.**

*Now, before I go farther, I want to just let y’all know that some of my message this week is drawn from reflections that the UCC provides as sermon resources. I really liked them this week, and they followed my own thoughts, so I want to repeat them here. Just giving credit where credit is due.*

William H. Willimon, a bishop in the United Methodist church and a well-known theologian and writer, and Kate Huey, a UCC minister and writer, emphasize that *both* Mary and Martha have important roles in this story, and that it would be a mistaken interpretation to view Martha as rebuked for doing the wrong thing. Willimon says in his reflection - “But what does Jesus mean when he says that Mary has chosen ‘the better part’? I doubt that Jesus means that sitting and listening is better than action, that listening is better than busyness, that quiet contemplation is better than active service. After all, this is Luke’s Gospel in which a Samaritan is commended for his action in behalf of the needs of another. Martha is simply going and doing likewise, as the Samaritan was commended.”

I like this reference to the Good Samaritan here. Last week I told you all to keep asking who your neighbor was, and keep coming up with a different answer. When you have that answer, you then *act* to help your neighbor. Here, Martha is welcoming Jesus as her neighbor, acting to serve him, provide for his needs. It is not she, though, who is recognized for doing the right thing, but Mary. The Good Samaritan story says to act, and this story seems to say to sit instead. (Kate Huey:) ‘Think about all the wonderful people – not just women, either, but men, too – who work in the kitchen and fellowship halls of churches all across the land, [serving and providing for our needs.] Think about what we would do without them, if they suddenly decided to take

this story at face value and sit down, right when we need to be pouring the coffee and putting out the baked goods. What would happen to church potlucks and, by extension, the gathering of food items for food pantries, the work to combat hunger and feed the world? Is that what this story of Mary and Martha means, that sitting and listening and praying and learning are more important than cooking the meal or laying out the welcome mat? No pastor in her right mind would suggest such a thing, and I don't believe it's what Jesus is saying, either."

Instead, (Kate Huey) 'we might think of today's passage as part two of Luke's story about Jesus teaching us about the heart of faithfulness, with the story about the Good Samaritan teaching us about loving our neighbor, and today's story...[in a very simple and beautiful way], teaching us about loving God. Now part of the irony here is that the lawyer asked what he needed to 'do' to 'inherit eternal life,' and yet, in this little story about two women, both of whom loved Jesus, Jesus says that all our efforts and deeds are to be balanced and even nourished by times of doing absolutely nothing but sitting and being with God.

I am reminded here of my message to you from a few weeks ago, on lines, and Keep Moving Forward, and Never taking your eyes off the goal. To follow God's will we have to stay focused on God, and just keep going when distractions try to derail us. Here, we learn that in order to stay focused on God, sometimes "Keep Moving Forward" means stopping to sit and listen to God.

Martha welcomes Jesus into her home, and then she becomes distracted by other things, and forgets to focus on him, her guest. Can we relate to that? Martha is a woman trying to fill her responsibilities set by her culture, to meet the expectations of a host providing a meal. We have expectations and responsibilities set on us by our society and culture as well. (Kate Huey-) 'We live in a world that seems to equate busyness with importance; a long to-do list, especially when it's finally completed, gives us a sense of satisfaction and even security...at least, until we start on a new list of tasks to be completed. For many, our days are packed, one after another, with many things, and our minds are full and overflowing, worried and distracted, like Martha, by many things. But Henri Nouwen once wrote that our lives, while full, are often unfulfilled. 'Our

occupations and preoccupations,' he said, 'fill our external and internal lives to the brim. They prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives.'

'Can you imagine what life would be like, even for a little while, without all the things that keep us busy? Can you imagine time – without any distractions, any to-do lists – time for our internal lives, hours spent in being with God, abiding with God, tending our relationship with God, listening to the quiet still voice of God still speaking to us, deep within our hearts? We gather on Sunday mornings to create that time for God, to pray, to contemplate, to be silent, to listen for God's voice. Sometimes it's enough, but sometimes not. We do so much talking in our churches – after all, we're very big on 'the Word' – but we can't hear God still speaking if we don't stop not just sometimes but regularly – and just sit and listen, like Mary at the feet of Jesus. How can the stillspeaking God get a word in edgewise over the cell phones, text messages, voicemail, television, and radio messages that bombard us? How can we tend to our internal lives like careful gardeners who spend time nurturing new growth, pulling weeds when necessary, and gently showering the thirsty green plants with refreshing water?

What do we listen for? Kate Huey refers to Psalm 131, translated by John Michael Talbot, in her reflection – something that perhaps we might listen for God's and Jesus' voice in – "O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes fixed on things beyond me; in the quiet, I have stilled my soul like a child at rest on its mother's knee; I have stilled my soul within me. So Israel, come and hope in your Lord; do not set your eyes on things far beyond you; just come to the quiet. Come and still your soul like a child at rest on its daddy's knee; come and still your soul completely.'

It seems that Jesus has chosen most unlikely teachers for us, one a hated Samaritan and the other, a lowly woman--not a respected Pharisee or lawyer, not an authoritative expert or a great prophet--a Samaritan and a woman teach us that hearing and doing go together. The point of the two stories, one after the other, is that it's not hearing OR doing, but it's hearing AND doing the Word of God that makes us faithful disciples. If we are so busy with our "doing" that we can't stop, regularly and long enough, to listen for God, well, then our lives, as Henri Nouwen says, will remain full, but unfulfilled. And that, to me seems like quite the opposite of "inheriting eternal life."

That's the twist in these two stories from the Gospel of Luke. When the lawyer asked about eternal life, it's easy to think of doing whatever we need to do to "earn" our salvation so we can go to heaven when we die. (So much for amazing grace!) But Jesus understood that the fulfillment of the promises of God has already begun, and we can taste and feel those promises in our own lives. When we welcome God in, we follow up the welcome by honoring our guest, worshipping in, not only making room for him in our home, but making him the center of our attention, the center of our being. We live according to God's presence in us, living out the stories of both the Samaritan, Martha, and the ant, as well as the grasshopper and Mary. Life abundant, as Kate Huey says, is full of word and work, hearing and doing, and resting in the presence of God.

Amen.