

Don't Just Do Something, Sit There

A Sermon by The Rev. Ken Calhoun

First United Methodist Church Athens, TX

July 25, 2010

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Everything from physicians to sociologists to psychologists tells us that life, to be lived well, needs balance. Life is about balance. Good life is about balance. Christian life is about balance. This story I think comes to us in many ways as balance. It's a story told only by Luke, and it follows another story told only by Luke. Immediately prior to this story in Luke's Gospel is the story of The Good Samaritan. If you were here a couple of weeks ago when I preached about the story of The Good Samaritan, you will recall that that story is about loving our neighbor and that loving our neighbor requires us to do something. Loving our neighbor cannot be a passive, emotional, "aren't they nice" kind of attitude. Loving our neighbor means loving our enemies, and it means doing something, getting involved, not sitting on the sidelines. It tells us that love must be a verb, an active verb.

And now here, immediately after that, he commends Mary for seemingly not doing anything, and cautions Martha about doing too much. Some of the more ancient versions or texts of the scripture have Jesus saying to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things. Only a few are necessary." In fact, only one, and Mary has chosen the good part. Make no mistake about it, Mary and Martha both loved Jesus, and he loved them both. The Gospel record indicates to us that these were close friends of his, almost family. It indicates that, in fact, that of the two, Martha may have been his favorite. Certainly she had a closer relationship to Jesus than did Mary. They had a brother; his name was Lazarus. We find that out in John's gospel. You may recall something about Lazarus. When Lazarus, their brother, was taken ill, it was Martha who sent someone to tell Jesus, "Your friend, our brother Lazarus, is sick unto death. Please come." When Lazarus died, it was Martha who sent word to Jesus, "Don't worry. He has died." When Jesus came anyway, it was Martha who rushed out to meet him, and said, "Oh, Lord, if you had only been here." And today when he comes to their home in Bethany, it is Martha who goes out to greet him and Martha who welcomes him into the house. So, it would appear that Martha and he had a very close relationship. She had a great deal of trust and

faith in him, a great deal of expectation for him. And in this story, Martha wants to express her love and appreciation for him by serving him and by serving his friends.

Now, many of us when we hear this story, we have envisioned Jesus and ten or twelve of his friends coming by her house to have dinner. No, this was a group of about a hundred people, because if you back up and read the story in context, Jesus has just received back the seventy people that he sent out in pairs to go do missionary work. They had just come back, and they are walking along telling him all about the wonderful things that have happened while they were out doing their work, the miracles they've seen, and they're going with him. So, you've got those seventy and you've got Jesus, you've got his disciples, Mary, Martha, probably their brother Lazarus, a few of their friends and family. Don't think about family dinner; think about church dinner. Except, it wasn't covered dish. Martha's responsible. She's the host. Now, one can hardly blame her for being a bit distracted. Martha wants to express her love for Jesus by making sure it's all done right, you know, by laying out a great spread, something King Solomon would be impressed by. Mary, on the other hand, who also loved Jesus, Mary needs to listen to him. She needs to sit at his feet, hear his words. There's something there that she needs. Mary had chosen the better part for herself, and Jesus was not going to take that from her.

Now, we cannot believe, I do not believe, I will not believe that Jesus chastised Martha for serving too much or for serving. This is the same Jesus who would put a towel around his waist and wash the feet of his disciples and then say to them, "If you want to be great in my kingdom, you must first be a servant." This is the same Jesus who gives us the entire notion of servant ministry, who says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to be a servant." Now, can you imagine someone who had that kind of thinking criticizing someone for being a servant? He spoke to Martha as he did because she was jealous of her sister. He spoke to Martha as he did because she wanted to require, demand, expect that Mary responded to Jesus' presence the same way she did in that moment. Mary, who was not responding and reacting to Jesus' presence in the same way as Martha, disturbed Martha. Her jealousy intimated that there was some peace of mind, some satisfaction of spirit, some sense that her service was itself enough that was missing. Or if it wasn't, she did not realize that her sister Mary had not arrived there yet. She needed to sit at Jesus' feet and listen and learn, to find that sense of peace and presence and purpose that comes from knowing God and knowing what God wants for you. Martha, with that sense of peace and purpose, should have allowed her sister to do what she needed to do to find that same inner peace. The error was not Martha's work or her desire to serve Jesus, but her jealousy of Mary who sought direction in her life by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening, trying to learn.

Satisfaction in life, satisfaction with life is all about purpose. You can do a lot of stuff, but if you don't have a purpose in mind, if you don't have a goal in mind, if you don't have a reason for it, it's just stuff. It's just something to keep you busy, often as not, to keep you busy so you don't have to think about not having a purpose in life. Happiness and satisfaction in life has to do with having a purpose, and for the Christian that purpose is fulfilling God's desire for us. And you cannot know that desire unless you take the time to listen to God. You've got to listen. There's nothing quite as satisfying as knowing what God wants you to do with your life and then struggling to get it done. You can't buy enough stuff, you can't join enough clubs,

you can't have enough hobbies, you can't make enough money to replace that feeling, to replace that sense, to replace that knowledge.

When I was a student in college, I did like most students my first year: I just kind of wasted it away, had a grand old time. A&M didn't exactly see it the way I did. So when I went home my first summer after my first time at A&M, they sent a note with me. Actually, they sent it directly to my father and explained to him that if my academic record and social life didn't change, my presence would no longer be required. So I spent a summer working at What-A-Burger and decided I didn't want my future to have to do with fast food, not that that's a bad thing, but that's just not what I wanted to do. And so I spent that summer taking stock of myself, figuring out "What do I want to do? What is my end game? What is my purpose? What is it that will make me happy? What do I really want to do?" As far back as I could possibly remember, I had loved biology and chemistry, I mean, even as a little bitty boy. And I had always been intrigued with medicine and the human body and how it functions and how it doesn't function. And so I made the decision I wanted to be a physician. I didn't want to be a practicing physician; I wanted to be a research physician. And that's what I set my goals toward. And they became the focus of my life. I sacrificed everything for that. For the next three years I had no social life, I had no money, I had very little sleep. You did whatever you had to do. I did whatever I had to do. Well, first I had to overcome that first year. You know, when you start at zero, you've got a long way to go to get to a 3.5 or above. Well, it wasn't a zero, but it wasn't far off. That was the focus of my life. But then I was dedicated to it, and I loved it, and I was headed that way.

And then in April, 1973, in my third year, I was studying organic chemistry about 2 o'clock in the morning. You know, sometimes when you read something or you study something over and over, your brain just gets a little fuzzy, and you realize you've read that same paragraph or worked that same formula ten times in a row and you still don't know the answer. It's time to take a break. And so I took a break, and I went over and opened the window to the dorm. I lived in Room 201 Crocker Hall, and once you got that corner room, you held onto it like gold because we didn't have air conditioning, and corner rooms had two windows, which meant you had a breeze. So I opened up the window, and I stuck my feet out the window and I just kind of lay back and let that cold air wash in over me. I had a Bible on my desk that my grandmother had given me. She had watched me misspend and awful lot of my youth and was under the distinct impression that when I got out from underneath my mother's and father's close supervision that not only would my physical and emotional health be in jeopardy, so would my soul. And so she gave me this Bible to go off to college with and told me that she had hidden money in it. So I would periodically take that down off the bookshelf, and I would just sit there and thumb through it. Oh, sometimes I would stop and read. Most of the time I just thumbed through it looking for money. That night I did that, just sitting there kind of relaxing. So I got that Bible down and I started thumbing through it, and I would keep a book mark. You know, at first you would just thumb through it like that and nothing falls out. So then you figure, "OK. I've got to go page by page." So I would keep a book mark just to make sure I didn't miss anything. So I got my book mark and I started thumbing through it, and as I sometimes did, I stopped to read. As I was reading along there, I suddenly became aware—it's a difficult thing to explain—all I can tell you is that I became aware that I was not alone. Now, I didn't see

Jesus floating up across the parking lot towards my dorm. I didn't hear anybody talking to me. There were no lights in the sky. But there was a sense that washed over me that made me completely, totally aware that I was not alone. And in the next moment—again, nobody spoke to me—but I just knew, I just knew that the direction of my life was about to make a dramatic change. I was not going to be a physician, research or otherwise. I was going to preach. Now I can't tell you how I knew that. I didn't hear somebody say, "Well, Ken, this is what you are going to do." I just knew. I know it doesn't really explain it, but it's the best I can do. I guess you had to be there.

I had no idea how you would do it. I assumed you had to have some kind of education, some kind of training, some kind of something. I didn't think you could get it at A&M, but I wasn't sure. And there was peacefulness about that. There was a sense of peace and a sense of just like, "Well, I'll be. Ha." And I sat there for I guess an hour, feet sticking in the window, and just thinking about that. Then I went to bed. The next day I called my best friend, Dick White. He was at Stephen F. Austin. He had a car and I didn't. So I called him and I told him what had happened because he had known since high school that he was going to be a preacher. I said, "How do you become a preacher? What do I do?" I'll never forget his words. He said, "You don't tell anybody this story, you don't talk to anybody about this. I will be up there to see you on Friday." And he said, "I'll get a Book of Discipline." I had no idea what a Book of Discipline was, but it sounded bad. "And I'll be up there and I will explain it all to you." And he did.

Now you would think that that would have been a very disappointing message and a very disappointing moment. After all, as I have said, I had been in love with biology and chemistry since I was in high school. I still am. I had sacrificed my finances, my social life, my sleep, my health, and whole lot of other things, trying to prepare myself to get into medical school, and now it was for nothing, now it was for naught. But there was a peace and a comfortableness about me that I had not known before. In place of this drivenness, there was this sense of peace. It was as if I had made some great discovery. Like I say, it was one of those "Aha!" moments. I didn't know the details of my future, but I knew the goal. I saw the big picture. All I had to do was work out the details.

Now I would love to tell you that everything about my life was grand, wonderful, and happy from that day forward, but that's not true either. I've had my ups and downs. I've had my bad times socially, emotionally, physically, professionally, even spiritually. But the memory of that night has sustained me through all of it. Of all the things I know in this world, scientific, social, experiential, of all the things I know in the world, nothing is as real to me as that night. Nothing is as certain to me as what happened that night. And most of the unhappiness that I have had in life since then has come when I have allowed what Ralph Spalding Cushman called "the business" to interfere with my relationship with God. As long as I kept that relationship strong and in close proximity—well, bad things still happened—but they were just bad things that happened. But when I allowed the press of business to keep me from spending time listening to and listening for God, then life would come crashing in on me. And even little difficulties could become huge and horrible.

Now, I think God comes to us if we are willing to listen. I think God comes to us in ways that He knows will be helpful to us. I think that God came to me in that night in that moment in

the way that he did because if He had come to me in a different way, if it had happened in the midst of a youth revival or a church service or some kind of special religious class or some kind of thing--I know myself; I know myself well. And I know that when the hard times came, I would simply reflect back and assume it was a great preacher who had over-stimulated me, that the music had somehow caused me to get caught up in things I shouldn't have, and that I had made a tragic error. But when God comes to you in the midst of studying organic chemistry, you can't fake that. And I think the great lesson here and the great lesson between Mary and Martha is not that we should ignore service to others. The Jesus who said, "If you want to be great in my kingdom, you must first be a servant" would not allow us the freedom to make that statement. But I think that the great lesson here is that we must also seek that peace of mind and that satisfaction of spirit and soul that comes from trusting God, and you cannot trust God if you do not know God. There is a peacefulness and a sense of contentment that only comes when your relationship with God is right and when you trust God, when you know God. So I ask you today: Do you have that peacefulness, that sense of contentment in your life? Are you frantically rushing about, engaging in a host of things, either searching for happiness or trying to avoid having to deal with the fact that you're not happy? Maybe what you need to do is stop studying so hard. Pick up a Bible, put up your feet, and listen for God. Don't spend all your time talking. Listen for awhile. Try sitting at his feet and listening for a moment. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.