

## Wesley United Methodist Church

July 21, 2013

"This Will Help You, If You Let It."

Luke 10:38-42

Some years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury was rushing to catch a train in London. In his haste, he accidentally jumped on the wrong passenger car and found himself on a car full of inmates from a mental hospital. They were all dressed in mental hospital clothing. Just as the train pulled out of the station, an orderly came in and began to count the inmates, "1-2-3-4..." when suddenly he saw this distinguished looking gentleman wearing a business suit and a clerical collar and he said: "Who are you?" The answer came back: "I am the Archbishop of Canterbury!" And the orderly said: "5-6-7-8."

Most of you know the story. Jesus and his disciples are making a journey and they come to the village of Bethany. A woman named Martha opens her home to Jesus. Martha shared her home with her sister Mary and their brother Lazarus. Yes, this is the same Lazarus that Jesus would later raise from the dead. Jesus developed quite a warm friendship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Most commentators assume that Mary was the younger sister. The scriptures don't actually tell us that. We often stereotype the older sister as being more responsible; the younger more free-spirited.

When our story opens Jesus is teaching in Martha's home and free-spirited Mary is sitting in attention at Jesus' feet listening to his every word. It was customary in the Middle East for students to sit at the feet of their teacher. However, it was not customary in first-century Palestinian Jewish society for a woman to be included among those students. Normally, in the ancient world, all of the adult women would have shared responsibility for preparing a meal, but it appears that Mary chose not to help.

It says a lot about Jesus that he doesn't encourage Mary to help Martha. Jesus was continually startling people with his disregard for cultural customs, especially within the family. Of course, it should not surprise us that Jesus would not restrict the privilege of sitting at his feet according to gender. Jesus did more to liberate women than any man who ever lived. Just because some of his followers through the centuries have not been as enlightened as he was doesn't change the fact that Jesus did not discriminate.

Jesus was full of surprises. Even today people try to put Jesus in a box. We think, "Here's what Jesus would do." Be careful when you do that. Jesus would be just as upsetting to our cultural expectations as he was to that first century.

It's not easy entertaining guests in your home and some of you ladies know what it's like. There is so much to be done. Particularly when you're entertaining a group of first-century men who are accustomed to having women treat them like masters. And it's even worse if you have a good-for-nothing sister who lollygags with the men and refuses to help. Oops, am I taking sides?

Martha is thoroughly disgusted with Mary and she makes her displeasure with her sibling known. She comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" Some of you are inwardly thinking of yourself, "Go, girl. Mary ought to be helping. It's only right." But, as usual, Jesus surprises us.

"Martha, Martha," Jesus answered, "chill out." Well, he didn't exactly say, "Chill out." But it amounts to the same thing. He says something like, "Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is really important right now and Mary has chosen it." This was not the reply Martha expected. And here, of course, is the message of our reading for the day. There are many things that are important in life, but only one thing is of ultimate importance, that is sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Martha was not in the wrong in going about her duties. We all know that Jesus knew that. There would have been a house full of hungry men if Martha had not been so conscientious in seeing after the details of entertaining her guests. This was probably the focal point of her life caring for her home and family. Martha was a responsible person. She did the things she believed were important and she did them well. We've all known Marthas, and we give God thanks for them. Some of them make all kinds of good things happen in our homes and in our church. But there is another dimension to life besides doing. There is more to life than simply keeping busy even keeping busy doing good, looking after others. And that's good. Those are things we ought to be doing...and more! I am grateful that Christians are in the forefront of every movement designed to make this world a better place. That is exactly where Jesus wants us to be.

Former President Jimmy Carter in his book *Living Faith* tells about a group of Christian laymen who were doing missionary work. They approached a small village near an Amish settlement. Seeking a possible convert, they confronted an Amish farmer and asked him, "Brother, are you a Christian?" the farmer thought for a moment and then said, "Wait just a few minutes." He wrote down a list of names on a tablet and handed it to the lay evangelists. "Here is a list of people who know me best," he said. "Please ask them if I am a Christian."

I love that story. Ask my neighbor if I am a Christian. That would be a good test for all of us to take. The clear implication is that you ought to be able to tell a Christian by what he or she does. And I am sympathetic to that perspective as are most of you, I guess. However, that is not all of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It is not even the better part of being a follower of Jesus. If it were, there would have been no need for Jesus to lovingly correct Martha.

We need to take time each day to sit at the feet of Jesus. It is good to be a responsible person going about doing all the good we can. It is important for us to take care of our families, and to feed the homeless and to serve our fellow men and women wherever they may be. But, in the process, we need to feed our own souls. This is where worship comes into the picture, and Bible study and prayer. That is where the fuel comes from for doing good works, meeting our responsibilities. Otherwise we run the risk of either burning out or resenting the tasks we are responsible for. We need the refreshment of seeking God's presence. We need to study the scriptures and to reflect on their meaning for our lives.

There is a wonderful story in one of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books that says it all. A father lay staring up at the ceiling. Beside him, his wife was fast asleep, exhausted after the long drive back home. The drive was made even longer by the emotional strain of returning home without their only daughter. It was her first day at the university. It was her first time away from them.

The father reminisced about his first day of college. It seemed like a lifetime ago, riding in his father's rickety old truck with his whole life packed into the back. The drive was incredibly long. He remembered a stop by a stream and eating lunch. But the similarities to his daughter's experience ended there. His daughter had a much larger dorm, stuffed full of electronics he could've only dreamed of at her age.

When his father left him, he looked him in the eye, shook his hand and said, "I have no real advice I can give. I was never smart enough to go to college myself. I don't have much money even now to give you, but here is a checkbook. If you get in a bind, write yourself out a small check and I'll do my best to make sure the money is there." He pulled the checkbook out of his pocket and handed it to his son. He then reached down and pulled out his old and worn Bible. There was never a night he didn't see his father reading his Bible. He was a simple man, but he was a man of great strength and faith. Handing it to him, his father didn't tell him to read it every morning or every night. He just said, "This can help you, if you will let it."

Now lying in his own bed, decades later, this father felt a twinge of regret. He knew he gave his daughter all he could give, but despite all the wealth and prosperity he achieved in his own life, it amounted to nothing compared to what his own father gave him. Quietly climbing out of bed, he made his way to the attic. He found the dusty old box father's Bible was in. He pulled it out and smiled. It was exactly as he remembered it. He carried the Bible down into his office where he found a large, padded envelope and set it inside. He grinned as he wrote a note. "This can help you," he wrote, "If you will let it."

And it can help us, friends, if we will let it. But we need to read it regularly and we need to read it prayerfully.

Martha was a fine person. She was a wonderful homemaker and host. But in her busyness, just as in ours, she ran the risk of missing what was most important in life sitting at the feet of Jesus. It's an easy mistake to make. Do all the good, responsible things God wants you to do but don't forget to spend time in God's presence.