Sermon Luke 10:38-42; 21 July 2019; Year C, Proper 11

Today is a special day as we bring Darby and Hayden for baptism. Baptism is the starting line in the walk of faith. So this is a big day. A day to celebrate and a day to begin that nurture in the faith.

And so there’s a little pressure on the message today for me. Just out of the starting gate, what kind of message would we give to two young girls as they begin their journey of faith? And what kind of message will speak to the rest of us as we continue in our own journey? And how does our scripture text—a story about two sisters—inform this conversation? There are a lot of things to kind of hold together in today’s message.

But as I have considered this question through this week, I’m grateful for a conversation I had this week that helps me focus my thoughts. But first, let’s hear our scripture text from Luke 10:38-42. Friends, listen for the Word of the Lord:

Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] 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."

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord; **thanks be to God.**

Two girls, two sisters, encounter Jesus. They get a chance to host Jesus in their home. Kind of like what we’re doing today. These two sisters have an opportunity to invite Jesus into their home as well. So what does this text tell us, what kind of instruction can we take away from this passage? What can we take away from this short passage where one sister tries to get Jesus on her side in the distribution of the household chores?

One thing we could take away is that trying to get Jesus on our side doesn’t always turn out the way we want, right? Maybe we need to spend our energy getting ourselves on Jesus’s side rather than getting Jesus on our side. Amen?

And here’s where I get some help from my conversation partner this week. This week a friend asked me, “Which is it? Are we judged by what we do during our lives or are we saved strictly by grace?” Well, that’s really not easy to answer. Seems like it should be. Is it this? Or that? Is it black or white? Is it right or wrong? But the truth is, scripture offers us support for both answers.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus describes separating the sheep and goats at the judgement, and the sheep are the ones who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoner.[[1]](#footnote-1) So it looks like Jesus is saying what we do during our lives makes the difference.

But the writer of Ephesians clearly says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”[[2]](#footnote-2) So this epistle clearly lands on the side of grace alone that makes the difference. So how do you answer?

And so, as we talked back and forth about works and grace, I just stopped in the middle of the conversation and said, “You know, as Presbyterians, we’re not likely to come to a hard and fast answer on a lot of questions of faith. Because the answers to so many of these questions are found hanging in the tension between texts. Like a bead strung on a line. Like marbles on a balance beam, these texts serve almost as weight and counter-weight as we seek to find our way in the life of faith.

And so if we apply that approach to today’s passage, on one end of the balance beam, we see a text that clearly affirms that a woman can sit and listen and study and learn from Jesus. We also see that what we historically think of as “woman’s work” –cooking and cleaning and serving at table—isn’t a category Jesus will defend or uphold. And then we also see again that we need to get ourselves on Jesus’s side rather than trying to get Jesus on our side. And all of those are good take-aways.

But also, we look for a counterweight. Is Jesus saying that all the things Martha is doing are unimportant? That the work of hospitality is insignificant? That the things we do to show love and honor to Christ or others don’t matter? I don’t think so.

And we don’t have to look far for a counterweight. We find a counterweight in the verse immediately prior to today’s passage. Jesus is giving instructions to a lawyer who has questioned him and Jesus says to him, “Go and do likewise.” And what Jesus is referring to is the story of the Good Samaritan.

In Luke 10:25-37, the story before Mary and Martha, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten by robbers, lying on the roadside half dead. A priest passes by, a Levite passes by, but a skanky Samaritan, for goodness sakes, a skanky Samaritan comes to the man in need of help. And he helps him. He saw to the physical needs of food, clothing, wound care, transportation and shelter. And at the end of the story Jesus says to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.”

Clearly, how we treat each other matters. Serving those in need matters. But so does sitting at Jesus’s feet to listen and learn and study. In the life of faith which matters more, our words or our deeds? That sets up an unanswerable question. What matters is our words **and** our deeds. It’s both/and, not either/or.

The things we do matter. The things we say matter. The things we listen to matter. And in all these things, we seek first and foremost to honor Christ in the world. And hopefully, when we soak ourselves in word and deed in what Christ would have us do, the folks around us can see it too. It’s just that easy. And it’s just that hard. Now, go and do likewise. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Matthew 25:31-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ephesians 2:8-9, New International Version of the Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)