

A sermon delivered by
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The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, July 22, 2007
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

[Genesis 18:1-10a\(10b-14\)](#)

[Colossians 1:21-29](#)

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

[Psalm 15](#)

I invite you to sit and listen. You may be seated.

Introduction

A good teacher knows how to reach his or her students. There is a growing trend in education to recognize student's varying learning styles. Two decades ago Howard Gardner developed a theory of multiple intelligences. He asserted that IQ was based on only one form of intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence – the kind that lawyers and scientists commonly possess. He proposed that there are many others such as musical intelligence (many of our choir members and certainly Claudia possess and work out of this intelligence), bodily-kinesthetic (athletes, dancers), and interpersonal (which allows one to understand and work with others). Teachers have used this theory to craft lesson plans that touch on as many intelligences as possible in order to reach a variety of students.

Luke demonstrates Jesus' ability to reach different people in different ways. In the Gospel lesson today we heard the story of Martha and Mary. Last Sunday we heard the story that immediately precedes this one in Luke's gospel: the story of the Good Samaritan.

The Good Samaritan

You may remember that a teacher of the law came to Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. He was trying to trap Jesus. Jesus replied with a question that elicited the correct response from the teacher of the law. That teacher recited the Shema, the most important Jewish prayer, by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." I want to note that the beginning of the Shema was omitted, which says, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God the Lord is one."¹ I want you to bookmark that for just a moment because it will be important a little bit later. I believe Luke wanted to plant the Shema in the reader's mind for when he alludes to it later in the story of Martha and Mary.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-9. See also <http://www.jewfaq.org/prayer/shema.htm>.

Jesus goes on to tell the teacher, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."² But the teacher is not finished. He asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan, which ends with the directive to "Go and do likewise."³

Martha and Mary

Now we have caught up with the story we heard today about Martha and Mary, in which a different directive is given: sit and listen. In the one story Jesus says, Go and Do, and in the other he says, Sit and Listen.

Let's spend some time living in this story.

Martha opens her house to Jesus and shows him hospitality. One commentator (Fred Craddock) notes the radicality of this event: Jesus was received into a *woman's* home and allowed a *woman* to sit at his feet, in other words, be his disciple. Rabbis in this culture did not typically interact with women in such a way. Luke makes it a point to number women among the disciples of Jesus.⁴ Although that is not the point of this sermon, it is important to point out how Jesus elevates the status of women against his culture.

Now, to the conflict in the story. Martha is busy preparing the food for Jesus and notices that her sister is just sitting there listening to Jesus. This may have stirred up an old family dynamic that has deep roots, but we don't know for sure. According to Family Systems theory, it is common for family members or siblings to act in reciprocal ways, for example, one is over adequate and the other is inadequate, one is decisive and the other indecisive, or one is dominant and the other is submissive. You've probably witnessed this in families yourself. Maybe Martha and Mary live with this family dynamic.

Nevertheless, I imagine she begins to smolder a little bit and tries to decide if she should say something. Maybe she was a little passive aggressive and started banging around pots and pans hoping her sister would come see what was going on and give her a hand. But Mary didn't take the bait. She just sat there at the feet of Jesus and listened to him. As steam builds and the pressure cooker begins to sing, Martha's anger rises. Maybe she's been down this road before with Mary. She knows that saying something to Mary won't do any good, so she decides to address Jesus instead. She bursts through the door into the living room and says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

She does not get the response she hoped for. Jesus takes this teachable moment and makes the most of it. He says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many

² Luke 10: 28

³ Luke 10:37

⁴ Fred Craddock, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Luke), (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 152.

things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Just as Jesus had recently met a man skilled in Scripture – the teacher of the law – who was having trouble hearing the word of God, and offered him the example of the Good Samaritan; now Jesus visits a woman so busy serving that she does not hear the word of God, and Jesus offers her an example, her sister Mary.⁵

Let’s spend some time reflecting on Jesus’ statement.

Martha, Martha...

Jesus repeats Martha’s name twice in what must have been a compassionate and affectionate tone meant to soothe her anxiety. Many preachers like to beat up on Martha because she didn’t get it right. I think, however, that Jesus’ attitude is one of compassion and love. Martha was doing what she thought she should do – show hospitality to this teacher, which takes a lot of work. Who can blame her for wanting to show Jesus the respect she had for him by providing him an appropriate, even luxurious meal?

...you are worried and distracted by many things...

Jesus is able to read Martha and diagnose the immediate issue as well as the deeper issue for her. The immediate issue is that Martha is busy and missing out on the opportunity to be in the presence of this life giving teacher, and hear the words that give life. This is only a symptom, however, of her deeper problem. She has a deep restlessness within her soul that keeps her busy all the time. She is like a shark – she must always be on the move or she feels like she will die if she stops. What is she running from? It’s not something external, surely it is internal. She is divided, or as Jesus says, distracted by many things. She lacks an integrity in her soul. That is not a moral judgment. When I use the word integrity I am referring to a oneness or a wholeness.

... there is need of only one thing...

The singular intensity that Jesus brings to this encounter illustrates what he is calling Martha to: oneness, unity, integrity, singularity.

Because of variations in the text, scholars wonder what Jesus meant here by “one thing.”

- Some wonder if he was telling Martha that only one dish was needed and that she need not work so hard to prepare a big meal? Perhaps.
- Some recall the wisdom of scripture that says, “...man does not live on bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”⁶ Maybe Jesus was telling Martha that the sustenance of this material world is not what life is all about; instead life is about the spiritual sustenance that comes from the word of God.

The Shema

⁵ Ibid., 151-152.

⁶ Deut. 8:3, Luke 4:4; John 6:27

Do you remember a little while ago when I asked that you bookmark something in your mind? I was talking about the Shema, the most important Jewish prayer found in the book of Deuteronomy. This prayer is central to all morning and evening Jewish prayer services and is required to be said twice daily by Jews. It is a declaration of faith in the one God and the assertion of the oneness of God's kingship. In short, it sums up the Jewish faith. "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one."

Judaism was radical because it was monotheistic in a polytheistic world. Its most important prayer is a reminder of the oneness of God's kingship. Judaism claimed there was one God when the prevailing notion was that there were many gods that controlled the universe.

The Shema would have been so deeply planted in the minds and hearts of Jews when Luke was writing his Gospel that it would have been redundant to say it. An allusion to it would have brought it to the surface of one's mind instantly.

Jesus says to Martha, you are distracted by many things. Her inner life, like the bustling city of Rome, crowded with temples dedicated to many pagan gods and goddesses, is divided. Jesus calls her to the oneness of God's kingship. Jesus used Mary as the example: listen and be made whole. Jesus calls Martha away from her distractions and invites her into wholeness.

Conclusion

Perhaps God is calling you (and me) to do the same. The call of God is always to a journey into wholeness. The roads we take, however, may be different according to what we need. For the teacher of the law, he needed to hear **go and do**. For Martha, on the other hand, it was **sit and listen**. The good teacher knows what we need to hear and how to reach us. To what is God calling you? Sit and listen.