

“The Better Part”  
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 17, 2016  
Genesis 18:1-10a      Luke 10:38-42  
First Presbyterian Church of Sandpoint, Idaho  
Pastor Andy Kennaly

Years ago I went on a study tour to Turkey and Greece. It was organized through Austin Seminary and involved traveling with 40 people from Texas on a tour bus, stopping at historical sites through western Turkey and southwest Greece. We looked at many, many, many ruins of ancient Roman society, ancient Greece, and the Ottoman Empire. In Turkey, some of the places we went to were old palaces of the Sultan. In the area around Istanbul, which used to be called Constantinople, we toured one of the Sultan’s main palaces. Images that stay in my memory to this day are walking by a building on the outside of the main palace, like a small apartment block. This is the area where the harem lived, the women who sexually serviced the supreme leader when they were called upon. To be selected for the harem you had to be beautiful, and your basic needs were taken care of through the wealth of the Empire. If you had a child in that process, you’d better keep a close eye on it if it was a boy, because that child was technically an heir of the throne. The competition was literally fierce, and murder of rivals and threats were rather common.

Another image in my mind that I recall from that tour involves a fairly large room where the Sultan would meet with very important visitors from around the world. That big room had a really high ceiling. And around the outer edge, up high, there were these little slits in the wall. These were observation holes so people could be up on the second floor looking down on the meeting, listening in, trying to watch these powerful leaders of Empires doing their thing. But the slits were fairly small for a reason. It was women who watched. Women could watch through the slits, but were not allowed in the visible presence of men during these important meetings. Women were not to be seen or heard. Women were kept in their place, and if a woman appeared in the room, she was in big trouble because it was really unheard of that the presence a woman would ever be allowed. Gender roles were very, very strict.

We have done a really good job in the Christian church of domesticating Jesus and allocating him to the “faith” part of our lives, compartmentalizing religion away from finances, politics, and other social justice issues. When we read stories like the one about Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary, we are so culturally removed from ancient Jewish life that we become numb to the shock value and the disruption Jesus is causing in cultural values and assumptions. It’s like using Novocain at the dentist to remove the pain of invasive procedures.

One of the shocking elements of this story is that Jesus is teaching in a home of two women, and Mary is sitting right at the feet of Jesus as he shares about God's Presence changing the world. Martha is doing the important work of hospitality and welcoming Jesus in very appropriate ways that would have been expected and necessary. Mary is in the realm of men. She is in the posture and position of a male disciple, sitting at the feet of Jesus in the company of men, learning and listening in the posture of someone in the presence of a great teacher, leader, and person of authority. She is focused on Jesus.

Martha complains, and the shock comes when Jesus does not agree with her, putting Mary back in her place, but the shock comes when Jesus says Mary has "chosen the better part." Jesus is legitimizing a woman taking the role of a disciple. Jesus is smashing a very rigid and established gender definition. And Jesus is liberating this woman by validating her choice. He gives Mary the freedom to choose what type of focus she wants to take, and even though she chooses a stance that is culturally unacceptable, and religious law is based on these gender definitions, Jesus reveals God's sovereignty is what truly defines "the better part."

As the Presbyterian Church (USA) is accused by many of becoming too liberal by ordaining homosexuals and seeking social justice for people who are lesbians, gays, bi-sexual, transgendered, or queer, the church is actually taking the Bible very seriously as we put lessons like this where Jesus shows gender is not a divider, not the issue at all, into practical expressions of faithful discipleship. While at first it may seem unnatural or uncomfortable to become welcoming to people of various gender expressions, it is no less shocking than Jesus accepting the invitation to come to a first century Jewish home owned by a woman, and then to have Mary sit at his feet. If the first sentence of going to Martha's house is enough, then the second sentence with Mary sitting like a disciple should definitely send you over the edge. What is this world coming to? Who does Jesus think he is? Martha nails it when she confronts him, she is speaking on behalf of the entire known world, "Lord, do you not care... (that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?)."

"Tell her then, to help me." Back me up, Jesus; don't rock my world, don't stretch us that far! Validate my assumptions! Confirm my cultural definitions! Don't change my interpretations of God's law! I know I'm right, don't you care? Tell her!

There are two words in this brief passage that are each mentioned twice. In biblical writing, one technique to get peoples' attention is to take important points or words and mention them more than once. One of the words is the name, Martha. Jesus says her name twice, "Martha, Martha." This means we are to perk up our ears and our biblical imagination as we hold that scene in our mind and in

our heart because what Jesus is about to say is the main lesson that the author, in this case Luke, is trying to emphasize. This main lesson is loaded! “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” In addition to her name, one of those words appeared earlier in this passage. The word, “distracted.” Right after we’re shocked that Mary is sitting “at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying,” we hear, “But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked...” Notice the spatial imagery. To ask Jesus about getting Mary to help her, Martha has to come to Jesus, which means she hasn’t been right there by Jesus like Mary is.

One commentator points this out by looking at the Greek words Luke uses in this writing. Basically, the spatial picture here involves Martha hovering around, in proximity but not like Mary who is focused on Jesus. Hovering around vs focused on. There’s a faith lesson in that for us, on how our lives of discipleship find expression and meaning.

In the Old Testament reading from Genesis we see that focusing on God’s Presence, like Abraham focuses on God’s presence in this visitor, takes time, effort, and even expense to make room and make welcome. Martha and Mary also take time, effort, and expense to host the Lord of hosts. How we live, whether we hover around Jesus, doing important tasks of ministry and mission, may not be the better part. Focusing on, being with, investing in relationship and connection leads to life in its fullness.

Grace Winn Ellis talks about participating in a medical mission trip to Haiti. She says, “Since I do not have any medical training, my role was to help count and label pills the night before we held a clinic, and the next day, to give out numbered cards, take blood pressure, and hand out worm pills and hand sanitizer.” So this was her task, to help bring healing to impoverished people in Haiti.

She continues her story talking about the church grounds and how people, mostly elderly, waited patiently outside on benches. Some of these people had walked two or three hours to get there. Everything was going well until after a noon break when the team realized they would need to leave because a stream they had crossed had water levels rising and they needed to get back across before it was impossible, but this also meant before everyone could be seen at the clinic. This was announced and all bets were off as the crowd clamored for attention and peoples’ good manners were scaled back to more primitive instincts of survival as pandemonium broke out. “There was pushing and shoving and yelling.” Their “check-in table was nearly overrun.”

Grace mentions, “I wasn’t really afraid for my safety, I was distressed by the anarchy and commotion. I did not blame these Haitian people. Instead, I felt that I had witnessed something fundamental to human nature. When a resource is valuable, when there is not enough to go around, and when there is no fair set of rules for distribution, anybody will put up a fight.” She reflects on this, saying,

“My experience of chaos at the clinic gave me a new perspective on the stories of Jesus...” She talks about some of those stories and insights she gained, but then gets down to this: “The point is not that the poor need our help—although they certainly do. The point is that we need to divest ourselves of the things that consume so much of our time and energy.”

(Teacher and playwright Grace Winn Ellis, <http://www.lpts.edu/about/our-leadership/president/thinking-out-loud/thinking-out-loud/2016/07/12/shedding-greed>)

Do you want to focus on Jesus, or are you content hovering? For those things that consume so much of your time and energy, even if they are good things, worthy and important, do the worries and distractions that come along with those derail your focus on what’s even better? Sitting, listening, taking a posture of openness and attentiveness because you are relationally in awe and wonder with the Lord who has come into your home by invitation only; this is the better part. Not that we don’t do ministry or mission or help people, especially the poor and those our society, culture, and even our own attitudes seek to exclude, but how do we shed the distractions, and the worry, and instead do these with a sense of sufficiency and a deep joy that is lasting? Notice that as Mary chooses the better part, this “will not be taken away from her.” That is a very deep joy, an identity so rooted in the loving Presence of God that all our insecurities are removed, which leads to a more peaceful life because we no longer have anything to defend, and we are not easily offended or have to prove that we’re right and others are wrong.

May God help us claim the faith and shocking power that these two women experienced. May God give to us courage to choose the better part. And may God be gloried now and forever. Amen.