Towson Presbyterian Church

July 24, 2022

Luke 10: 38-42

Rev. Joel Strom

“Blessing and Becoming”

**Luke 10:38-42**

*38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. 40But 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.’ 41But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’*

Today’s story is short, it’s only 5 verses long, and it’s only found in Luke’s gospel, and yet, it at times has been a little divisive. At times, in the church’s history, it has caused division and tension due to Jesus emphasizing Mary’s decision to sit at the feet of Jesus, soaking up his words and his presence, over Martha’s decision to serve and provide hospitality *to* Jesus. For we could hear this story in multiple ways, but one way to hear it is in such a way that Jesus seems to criticize Martha a little bit for all she’s doing to prepare dinner for him and probably others as well. If you heard this story in such a way, I’m not surprised. Is one greater than the other?

It's a little odd because Jesus values service so much, right?! It’s a hallmark of his teaching and what he believes discipleship and living his way in the world is all about. The story that comes immediately before this story is the well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is talking about the two greatest commandments – love God and love your neighbor – and a man tries to trip him up a little and asks, “Well then, who is my neighbor?”

Jesus tells a story about a man who on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho is robbed, beaten, and left half-dead on the side of the road. All these different people walk right by him and decide not to help, except a Samaritan man, who has immense compassion on him. Samaritans and Jews were not on great terms in the first century, and in this parable, it’s the Samaritan who was the true neighbor. Jesus tells this story about radical service *right before* he enters Martha’s house.

And then later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is walking with his disciples and an argument arises as to which one of them would be the best and the greatest disciple. They ask, after you, Jesus, who will be #1? And Jesus says, “Guys, you’ve got it all wrong. The one who’s last will be first in my kingdom. The goal is to serve…like me.

And at TPC, service and hospitality around food are our bread and butter (pun intended). So much of what we do here is centered around food. It’s been on hiatus for the last couple of years due to Covid and be on the lookout for it to restart this fall, but for over a decade *Sunday Community Lunch* was our primary outreach. More people in our church were a part of a Sunday Community Lunch team than anything else. Every Sunday downstairs in Thompson Hall at 12:00pm a team served a hot meal to anywhere from 15-30 guests. They prepped the meal, they served it, they sat with our guests, and they cleaned up before heading home. At Sunday Community Lunch, our church served and offered great hospitality.

When that ministry paused at the beginning of the pandemic, food ministry continued here at TPC, and we started helping the Mount Calvary AME Church and their Wednesday meal. Food ministry in this church has engrained itself within our DNA…it’s just who we are now. Our service and hospitality are some of the many gifts this congregation shares with our surrounding community. And I would guess that service and hospitality were a skillset and some of the many gifts that Martha possessed and shared with people. I imagine her getting word that Jesus had made his way into town and she said to herself, “Well, we must get a meal going! Someone needs to host him. I’ll do it!” And soon enough, there’s a small crowd in her home and she’s now cooking for more than she originally envisioned, and she needs help. She sees her sister, Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, soaking up his words and his teaching,

And who knows the dynamic of their relationship, right? We are not privy to Martha and Mary’s past, and the history of their relationship, but Martha sees Mary sitting in front of Jesus, which was a role normally designated only for men at this time, and she says to Jesus, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left all of this for me to do? Please tell her to help me.”

But Jesus, it seems, takes Mary’s side.

“Martha, *he says*, you are worried and distracted by so many things. And right now, there is need of only *one thing*. To be with me, to sit at my feet, and not give but receive.”

As we read this story today, and think about Martha and Mary, I wonder…who do you relate to more today…Martha or Mary?

I would answer in different ways at different times in my life, but today, if I’m honest, I would say I relate more to Martha. And I relate to her in this way - I’ve got to-do lists to check off. I’ve got places to be. Stuff must get done. I don’t have much time right now to sit.

This past Tuesday, as we sat in the library for our Staff Meeting, I noticed out of the corner of my eye sitting on the bookshelf, a red book. That red book is *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World* – and that book was the theme of my sabbatical last summer. In the Spring and Summer of 2021, we explored and tried to put into action the book’s suggested practices.

We were encouraged and invited to take on Silence and Solitude and find some time during the day - even if it’s only for 5 minutes, or 2 minutes, and put the phone away, turn off the TV, let the to-do list go… and be still…. and remember God’s presence.

And then it was the practice of Sabbath and take one day out of the week, or a half-day, or an hour and give yourself permission to let go of your work – the work that you’re paid to do, and all the unending work that we find at home, that never ends, and rest, or do something that brings you joy, that reminds you that you are more than what you do. The Sabbath reminds us…*painfully sometimes*… that our ultimate identity is *not* in what we do but who we are in God.

Then it was Simplicity, and we took a month to try and thin out some of the stuff that can fill our lives and take us away from what truly matters, and what we *long for* in this life. The invitation to simplicity challenges the widely held belief that the more we have the happier we will be.

And finally, it was Slowing, and intentionally trying to slow down our bodies. One of the suggested practices was to literally walk slower. To try and walk at a slower pace. It’s incredibly challenging…I took it on myself.

And what we learned, or maybe we simply just acknowledged, is that our modern world is not very concerned about who we are *becoming*, or how we are connected to God, or connected to other people, or to our own souls. Those are not of high priority to the modern world. Production, efficiency, and gettin’ stuff done, that’s the bottom line to the modern world. And getting’ stuff done is obviously important, but so is who we are *becoming*.

And throughout my sabbatical last summer, my goal was to take on these practices and slowly try and lean into a different rhythm, a different way of life. And naturally, I would expect you to think that I came back a changed person, right? And I did, in a way, but before I knew it, this past Fall, I was right back into the chaos of the modern world, addicted to my phone, struggling to take any kind of an authentic Sabbath, and unable to sit in silence. It’s only been in the last couple of months that I’ve again attempted to take on silence and solitude.

And sometimes on this journey of following Jesus that we find ourselves in, sometimes in our honest and authentic desire to serve God and serve our church, as faithfully as possible, we can get to a place where we can feel like a dry sponge that is in desperate need of water. And it can creep up on us. It can catch up to us, rather quickly, before we even realize it’s happening, before we even realize resentment has made its way in.

Martha is such a faithful disciple, and I would guess that she gives and gives and gives. She is filled with hospitality. She is a servant, in so many ways. And Jesus says to her, what you need right now, Martha, is actually just one thing…come and sit with me, and listen and receive, so I can fill you up. I can take that sponge of yours that might be a little dry and coarse right now and soak it with life-giving water.

Personally, I have found that I can faithfully serve and bless others, with my own strength and my own determination and my own will, for a while, but only a period of time, if I am not simultaneously *becoming*. And this is probably universal. We can only Bless for so long if we are also not sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words, and soaking up his presence.

And what that looks like for each of us is probably not universal. The first two practices that I described from *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* - Silence & Solitude, and Sabbath – they both speak to me. I find them to be incredibly challenging, but they can help me to get to that posture that Mary finds herself in, and what Jesus is inviting Martha into…to sit by his feet and soak up his words and his presence. And that you’re here today, tells me that you are on your way. That you have gathered, either in person or virtually, speaks to your desire to receive and to hear the words of Jesus, to sing hymns, to turn our hearts to God in prayer.

But there’s more, there’s always more waiting for us.

It’s why our opportunities for Spiritual Formation at TPC fall into three categories – Belong, Become, and Bless. We long for you to know that you Belong to this community of faith, that you can use your gifts to Bless others, and that you are slowly Becoming…you are Becoming who God has created each of you to be.

And so how do you sit at the feet of Jesus and soak up his words and be filled with his presence?

How do you know, as the writer of Psalm 42 said, how do you… Be Still…and know that I am God?

For we need both. We need to give, and we need to receive. We are invited to bless and become.

And God is in the midst of both of them.

Thanks be to God.