

Theme: Two aspects of being a discipleship

A few weeks ago I was chatting with a member of our congregation about the upcoming fall schedule changes and the new 10:05 Christian Education time that we are calling, "Building Connections." We were discussing what kind of offerings might be available during that time. I was fascinated when this person commented that she would not be very interested in attending a bible study. She said: "In the first place, I don't know much about the bible and I don't want to feel foolish or dumb. And in the second place, I'm more interested in topics that deal with the practical realities of everyday life." The first comment didn't surprise me as I've heard it often enough people attending a bible study for the first time. But as I thought about the second comment, I began to wonder if some people really see the bible as having little, if any, relevance to the actual realities of everyday living. Certainly it's a religious book; perhaps an ancient tome of some historical value; but does it have anything that connects with the practical realities of living in today's world?

Well, if you've ever wondered that, then pay attention to today's gospel story: a short story telling about sibling conflict and who's going to do all the chores around the house. A story that, even in the midst of a potential family dispute, invites us to consider what it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The story of Jesus visiting at the home of Mary and Martha follows immediately on the heels of Jesus telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Like the Good Samaritan, Martha's first impulse is to get something going – she's busy, she's active, and she is providing the expected hospitality that comes with having guests in her home. In fact, she's being faithful to the tradition of hospitality begun long before when Abraham welcomed three guests to his tent – a story we heard read this morning from the Old Testament from Genesis. And just as Abraham turned to Sarah to assist him with the duties of hospitality, Martha expects her sister Mary to do the same. Martha does not expect Mary to plop herself down at Jesus' feet and leave all the work for her to do.

Who can blame Martha for getting irritated with her sister? This is real life! All of us could cite example after example of when we have felt like we were left with the responsibility of getting some task accomplished without enough help to make it happen! It happens in our work places. It happens in our homes. In fact, I hear these sorts of complaints frequently here at St. James': not enough help to do minor repairs on our buildings; not enough people to help plan our Adult Forums; not enough people willing to run and serve on the vestry. So it's not surprising that Martha, in her frustration, finally approaches Jesus with her complaint: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me by myself to do all this work" (*a paraphrase*)? Jesus response is telling: "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things . . .*" Jesus is not chastising Martha for being busy and undertaking all her tasks; instead he sees right into her heart to the **worry and distraction** that's taken root. Martha has lost the focus of whom all this hospitality is suppose to serve – in this case, Jesus. Mary, for her part, sitting at Jesus feet and listening to his teaching has kept Jesus as her central focus

This story can be bothersome. It has sometimes been interpreted to hold up a “contemplative lifestyle” as a higher form or more advanced level of spirituality. How often have you heard Jesus’ words to Martha, “*There is need of only one thing; Mary has chosen the better part . . .*” interpreted to mean that a life of quiet prayer is more spiritual than a life filled with activity? Those who pray are “spiritual;” those of us who do . . . well, we’re just . . . And for you men sitting here today . . . it would be tempting to dismiss this story as something of a “chic flick” story – maybe there’s something here for you women, but not much for us “problem-solving, action-oriented” men. Perhaps this is why Luke places this story in tandem with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which is certainly a man’s story, full of action and problem solving, and a story that ends with Jesus saying, “*Go and do likewise.*” The two stories together should prevent us from moving into such either/or thinking!

Jesus is not criticizing Martha because she chooses to offer diligent service and ministry in the many tasks that need to be done to provide for her guests. Such tasks are themselves manifestations of discipleship. No! Her problem lies not in the tasks themselves but in that she succumbs to distraction and anxiety while performing these tasks. And that particular problem is not, in my observation, either gender-related or something that only happens to biblical characters. This is all too often our experience. How often have you or I found ourselves so enmeshed in the details of some project or task that we forget the very reason for which we undertook the task in the first place? You may have heard it said that God is in the details; that’s true, but it’s also true that the devil can be in the details. And the devil loves to stir up distractions that shift our focus away from the very reasons for which we have undertaken those tasks in the first place, leaving us in frustration and anxiety.

Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen “the good part” (better put from the original Greek than the *better* part), which will not be taken away from her. I take this to mean that she has chosen, to use the words of theologian John Shea, “***the connection to God who is good, the ground and energy of effective action.***”¹ Mary has kept a singular focus on Jesus himself. “*There is need of only one thing,*” says Jesus. In other words, “keep focused on me,” says Jesus, “and don’t get distracted.”

So what’s the life lesson in this story about Mary and Martha? First, there is not one form of Christian practice or discipleship that is better or higher than another. Neither contemplation nor action-oriented service is better than the other. Both are needed. This is the bifocal nature of what it is to be a Christian disciple.

Second, the call to action is a call to reach out to the world of our neighborhood, even to those we may not like, as is clear from the story of the Good Samaritan. Sometimes we have to go and do. **Serving others** is a necessary activity for those who would call themselves disciples of Jesus!

Third, sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening and learning is also a necessary aspect of Christian discipleship. It enables us to keep a singular focus on Jesus so that when we move into action, we do not become distracted and worried.

¹John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: The Relentless Widow, Year C* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 203 as quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3*. Ed.: David L, Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 267.

Both action out in the world and sitting and listening to Jesus are complimentary and necessary aspects of discipleship. We've all heard the phrase: "*Don't just stand there, do something!*" This phrase indeed represents one aspect of being a Christian disciple. But the flip side of this popular saying is the other aspect of Christian discipleship: "*Don't just do something, stand there.* Or in this case, sit there – listen and learn.

The challenge for us as Christian disciples of Jesus is to learn the balance between doing and sitting.