

GREAT MOMENTS IN SCRIPTURE (2) “Essential and Peripheral” – a sermon by Gary Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: Luke 10:38-42.

Text: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” --Luke 8:41-42

We are in the midst of a sermon series entitled, “Great Moments in Scripture.” They are inspired by the exciting Christian writer and Presbyterian minister, John Ortberg of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Northern California. I am using some of John’s thoughts as jumping off points for these messages and am grateful for his books; *Everybody is Normal Till You Get to Know Them* and *God is Closer Than You Think*.

Last week we looked at the story of a woman caught in adultery and at the way Jesus handled those accusers who were threatening to kill her. He said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone.” We saw in Jesus a man who did not condone what she had done but neither did he condemn her. Instead he told her to go her way and sin no more and we can believe the gracious way he in which he dealt with her brought hope, healing and new life.

This morning we continue with a second “great passage”, the story of Mary and Martha. From John’s gospel we learn that they live in Bethany, a village on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and that they have a brother named Lazarus and that the three of them are friends of Jesus. One gets the impression that Martha may be the eldest sibling and head of the household for Luke tells us it was she who welcomed Jesus into their home.

This passage centers on the two sisters who have two very different temperaments. Through the ages many people have often concluded that Jesus preferred Mary’s temperament to Martha’s because he admonished Martha and praised Mary. This is one interpretation of the passage but is temperament the real issue?

Lots of people who live together have different temperaments. They occur in families—Jacob and Esau, Rachael and Leah, Cain and Abel; and different temperaments are the stuff of great literature like the sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*, or the men in Dostoevsky’s *Brother’s Karamatsov*. Opposites can make a good team such as the “Mr. Type-A, the Apostle Paul, and his counterpart, the friendly and affable Barnabus.

People are often attracted to someone with an opposite temperament from theirs. Think of Adam and Eve, Priscilla and Aquilla, and Sampson and Delilah. While such relationships can be volatile or even destructive, more often than not, they are quite successful for together the couple is much stronger and more complete than they were alone.

Jesus does not prefer Mary because she is quiet and reflective while Martha is a busy, over-achiever. There were times when Jesus touted the virtue of being

quiet and prayerful, but there are also many, many instances where he praised those who did not just talk about religion but who lived it in service to others. Jesus himself worked long and hard and saw virtue in hard work.

The story of Mary and Martha is a story about what it means to be Jesus' disciple. Clearly, Mary has made the decision to be with Jesus, and while Martha may want the same thing for her life, she has blocked that possibility with self-imposed obstacles. More about that later...

In Bible times the roles of the sexes was very clearly defined so that when the unmarried Martha welcomed the unmarried rabbi Jesus into her home, that would have been seen as highly irregular. He went there as her guest and probably ate dinner there and may have even stayed overnight. It was all on the "up-and-up" but very unusual and may have been behind a general atmosphere of tension that came out in Martha's behavior. But the tension was compounded because of Mary who "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying."

When I did graduate study at the University of Marburg in Germany, I observed an unusual phenomenon. I attended the lectures of a famous professor who had fifteen or twenty "docents" under his tutelage. Docents are students working on a higher degree under a professor and, in the German system, they often followed him around, attending his lectures and learning just as much as they could from him outside as well as inside the classroom. The professor was admired and often idolized by the docents.

That practice was something like what happened in the time of Jesus. A traveling Rabbi would often have disciples who followed him around and wanted to learn from him, not only intellectual knowledge like the German students, but spiritual and practical knowledge. They would want to "sit at the feet" of the Rabbi and watch his every move and see how he would handle daily situations in order to learn just as much as possible of how he lived his life.

Ortberg tells a true but hilarious story from the Jewish *Talmud*, a sacred writing of the time, of a disciple who was so anxious to learn everything from his Rabbi that he stayed with him night and day. The Talmud records that this disciple even snuck under his rabbi's bed so that he could be present when the rabbi and his wife went to bed. When the rabbi found his disciple down near his slippers and asked what he was doing there the student replied, "This too is Torah, and I need to learn!" Needless to say, the Rabbi was not sympathetic with the student's zeal!

But apparently 1st century Jews sometimes spoke a blessing that expresses the commitment of a disciple to stay in the presence of his teacher and it went like this: "*May you always be covered by the dust of your rabbi.*" The connotation was that you would follow your rabbi-teacher so closely that the dust of his feet would be the thing that caked your clothing and the lines of your face.

Not long ago I was out in a beautiful area where there was a lot of fresh water and I just had to stop what I was doing and watch as a mother duck came along with six or eight babies walking right behind her step for step. That's another way to speak the "dust of the rabbi" – having it imprinted on your brain so that this is the one you want to follow, this is the one you want to emulate, this is the one who has the words and the ways that you find worthy to follow. **AND THAT WAS THE CHOICE THAT MARY HAD MADE** and what a choice it was for she had chosen to follow the man who is the way, who is the truth and who is the life—the man above all men who has the words of life and who will never leave you or forsake you or fail you.

Rabbis are honorable men but they are fallen creatures like all of us and sooner or later, they will disappoint, but Mary had chosen to be at the feet of Jesus, to be covered with the dust of the rabbi who is the Son of God and that's why Jesus favored her approach to her sister's.

Meanwhile, Martha is back in the kitchen doing her preparations. Luke does not say she was too busy, he simply says she was "distracted" which leaves us with the feeling that Martha probably wanted to be with Jesus but had allowed herself to be pulled away from him by other pressures. And for our purposes it doesn't really matter what kept her from the feet of the rabbi, from being covered by the dust of the rabbi, the question we need to ask is this: what keeps us from Jesus?

Isn't there some "Martha" in all of us? We have all kinds of good intentions. Like Martha, we even invite Jesus into our homes. But then, we end up missing out on his presence, not because we reject him, not because we dislike him, not because we want to, but because he just gets crowded out. We get overwhelmed by the preparations for life, we are full of life's busyness, and what happens in us is reminiscent of the time of his birth when Luke records those tragic words, "There was no room in the inn."

There's an old saying, "Let go and let God," and that is just what Martha needed to do, as we need to, too! But there's an art to letting go.

I have a brother who has a hard time letting go when he is putting on a golf course. He putts the ball and then, when the ball is rolling down the green, he tries to steer it into the cup...as if that is possible! It is hard to let go because we want to maintain control even if that means continuing to worry about things long after it is too late! I love the beginning of Psalm 23 which says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want!" If we could begin each morning that way, if we could just turn things over to God, if we could just let go after we have done all we can do, we would be so much better off!

John Ortberg says part of our life is spent in the living room in peace and quiet, with Mary; but a greater part is often spent in the kitchen with Martha. Your kitchen is the place where you work and make your plans and keep busy and it is

usually the place where we start acting like Martha “being distracted by many things.”

In the comedy film *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal is talking with Jack Palance who plays a rough and tumble cowboy named “Curly”. At one place in the movie Curly holds up his right index finger and says, “The secret of life is one thing.” “But what is that thing?” asks Billy to which Curly answers, “Ahh, that is for you to find out.”

Isn't it interesting that Jesus says much the same thing to Martha? “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” Reading carefully the comment in its context I think we know what that one thing is—it is being at the feet of Jesus, it is being his follower, it is being like Mary who made the decision to be his disciple, to be covered in the dust of the Rabbi, Jesus.

One of the greatest Martha's that ever lived was a man the world knows as “Brother Lawrence.” A simple, unpretentious brother in a 16th century French Abby, he learned to “practice the presence” of God in the everyday. A cook and dishwasher, he so thoroughly kept the Lord before him, that princes, bishops, nuns, cardinals and popes came to learn at his feet. Brother Lawrence learned the art of letting go and letting God. His priorities were aligned with his faith and he found God in the everyday. Once he said, “It is not necessary to have great things to do. I turn my little omelets in the pan for the love of God.” He was covered with the dust of his rabbi, Jesus.

This great moment in scripture, the encounter of Jesus with Mary and Martha, is not about temperament and Jesus' preference of one person over another. It is about discipleship and what it means to call Jesus “Lord.” A lot of people just give lip service to Jesus but they are missing out, big time!. I hope Jesus is your Lord and that you are really trying to follow him. It's no fun being stuck out in the kitchen unless he is there with you, but the beauty of the Living Lord is that he can be with us wherever we are.

Psalm 37:4 says, “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Do not let anything distract you from this one, overarching thing—to seek the Lord and to be covered in the dust of your rabbi, Jesus. Amen!