

Letting Jesus Serve You¹

We learn a great deal about a biblical text by paying attention to what stands next to it. Accordingly, we take our start this morning by remembering where we left off last Sunday. The Parable of the Good Samaritan comes immediately before our story of Jesus' visit in the home of Mary and Martha. You'll recall from last week that the Good Samaritan story begins with a bright lawyer correctly summarizing the whole point of his Jewish faith—love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as you love yourself. After stating that great truth, the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer focuses on only half of that summary—the love of neighbor. To illustrate the neighborly kind of love, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Now that story is so interesting and quirky and famous that we may reach the end and lose track of the fact that there is another shoe to drop. What does it mean to love God? So by paying attention to the text that comes immediately before, we read today's lesson knowing that we're going to learn about loving God.

Instead of nameless characters—a priest, a Levite, a Samaritan—we have two named friends of Jesus, Mary and Martha. These sisters, together with their brother Lazarus, appear in

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on July 18, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia. More information and other sermons may be found at www.fpclagrangec.org

other gospels which relate other episodes. There's a depth of friendship here that is shown in the intimacy of the conversation. Martha feels close enough to Jesus to express her irritation to him. Jesus is close enough with Martha to speak her name in an imploring way, "Martha, Martha!" This almost familial closeness happens not only here but also over in John's gospel when Jesus shows up late, days after Martha and Mary's brother, Lazarus has died. Martha can hardly contain her grief and anger and she speaks frankly with Jesus. "If you had been here, Jesus..." Martha is speaking to Jesus much as a sister might speak-- without formalities. We hear these words and our stomach begins to knot up. Jesus is in trouble with Martha. So, as Luke tells us this story, he isn't painting with a broad brush with a good guy and a bad guy and a moral at the end. The text is giving us a nuanced, detailed, living color, historical episode that is more subtle than a parable. These are real people.

We read that Martha received Jesus into her house. We should not let this seemingly simple statement pass by without appreciating of its gravity. The familiar practice of entertaining guests and the coming and going of people into and out of one another's homes is captured with a handful of Greek words. Hosts receive friends at the house. Dinner guests enter

into their host's home. Since we also entertain and visit friends, we understand this practice and these expressions effortlessly.

What is less obvious is that the earliest Christians borrowed the language of entertaining and visiting to express a deeper reality. Responding rightly to Jesus Christ is a whole lot like having him up to the house for dinner. If you flip forward in Luke's gospel to the story of the conversion of Zacchaeus—the little tax collector who fell out of the Sycamore tree when Jesus invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house, we read that Zacchaeus came down and received Jesus. The story is teaching us what salvation is like. Receiving.

Or to use another famous example, in Revelation, we read that Jesus stands at the door and knocks. This is a metaphor for responding rightly to God's gift of Christ and salvation. "Come on," says Jesus, "open the door, let's eat together, receiving me is me receiving you."

So when we read that Martha received Jesus, the nuance is that Martha, like the theologically trained lawyer who asks Jesus, "who is my neighbor," ...that Martha gets it. Martha has found the all-important path. For two thousand years, the evangelical center of Christian faith boils down to receiving Christ, you know, as Lord and savior.

So, Martha is a sister in the Lord, an intimate friend with Jesus, who receives him into her home. And then, beyond that, Martha serves him. We see in our lesson Martha diligently laboring in the kitchen to provide practical assistance to Jesus' ministry. She's preparing a meal for him. Today a million churches worldwide are hearing a million sermons. And if things are going well in those million churches, then what the people are hearing is that if you will receive Jesus Christ in your heart and if you will serve him you've got it. Do that and then enjoy your Sunday lunch, you've done a good day's work.

Here's the surprise. Martha does everything right in the story and she's not the hero of the piece. Little sister, Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet, turns out to be our example of, what? Loving God.

There's a pattern in Jesus' ministry that sheds light on what we're looking at in this moment. In several places two people are compared. One is the conventional good guy. One is the conventional bad guy. But in Jesus' Kingdom value system, the bad guy turns out to be closer to the truth that Jesus wants us to understand. The party animal, Prodigal Son, drags himself home after a wild time in the far country, and he taps into Dad's love better than the fine elder brother who stayed at home and worked on the farm. The Pharisee and the tax collector

parable ends with the tax collector being praised. The respected priest, in the Good Samaritan story, carefully guards his ritual purity and does not touch the body of the robbery victim at the side of the road. The Samaritan, notorious for being of a people who compromised their Jewish purity, turns out to be the one who loves the neighbor in the manner that Jesus has in mind. Jesus often uses characters who are outside conventional respectability to illustrate the flourishing faithful life that fulfills God's vision for redeemed humanity.

It happens again here. Little sister Mary lets Martha fix the whole meal. Martha—the original Martha Stewart--has taken on a big job. She wants for everything to be just nice for Jesus who has been working so hard. Flowers from the garden are arranged on the table. The good china is out. No, Martha isn't going to slip in a Mrs. Smith frozen pie for dessert no matter how good they've gotten those things. She's using all her own recipes. It's a big job doing this up right. Very feminine. So, we're not surprised that Martha feels abandoned. You can practically feel her ire back in the kitchen. The cupboard doors shut with a bit of a slam. The pots and pans are just a little noisy. Someone's not happy back there.

Not only is Mary shamelessly letting Martha do everything. She is donning the role of the student. This is the Middle

East. Girls don't go to school. But Mary seems oblivious to all of these cultural expectations. There she is sitting at the feet of Jesus. And he is fine with that.

So Martha does everything right. And Mary does a couple of things less than right. And Mary is the one who exemplifies what loving God looks like.

Let's not miss how this can speak to us. It is still crucial to do what Martha did—to receive Jesus Christ, to take him in and to serve him. But there's a deeper manner of receiving him that also receives what he would teach us. I'm talking about the scandal of being a student. Can you and I really take in, not only the acceptance that comes when we open our hearts and say, "Yes, Lord, I accept your acceptance of me, I desire your forgiveness, I receive you." Can we also receive Jesus' amazing thoughts: "Don't be anxious about what you shall eat or what you shall put on." Wait a minute, don't worry about survival. How does that work? How can we forgive seven times seventy times? How can we have authority over dark mysterious powers? How can we pray and really get answers? These are the things that we learn and that change us from the inside out if we would do what Mary did.

If we're anywhere near the truth about this story, we in this very church need to make some adjustments. As a minister,

I'm willing to admit that we've discounted discipleship in the church. Receiving forgiveness rather than receiving Jesus' teaching is our tendency. We don't expect, in this congregation, wholly new characters that have been shaped by the teachings of Christ. We barely wrestle with the sheer difficulty and radicalness of Jesus that his original disciples—his first students—could not have missed. If we're correct about all of this, there needs to be a whole lot more listening to our Lord.

We're not talking about which of the two sisters was a Christian. We're talking about two whom Jesus loved, but of one who found the richer path. We're talking about discipleship—being a student an apprentice to Jesus. It's not just getting a ticket to heaven. It's listening, forever talking with God, trying to implement in our lives today, it's returning again and again with an open mind to church and the scriptures. That's the good portion and Mary found that path.