

Wesley United Methodist Church

July 21, 2019

“Sisters.”

Luke 10:38-42

I want to begin with a song. Don't worry, I'm not going to sing it. Perhaps I should say I want to begin with a song title. I'm not going to ask how many of you remember the song. I've heard it many years ago at Gertrude Rinstra's home. She was one of my early parishioners at the Leonidas UMC and she always played background music when she was doing her household chores. The song is titled simply “Sisters.” It begins by describing how devoted two sisters are to one another. I couldn't remember the words so I had to google it. But its infamous refrain goes like this: “Lord, help the mister who comes between me and my sister and Lord help the sister who comes between me and my man.”

Why Jesus chose to get involved in a spat between two sisters, I haven't any idea. He should have known better. Experts tell us that, with regard to sibling relationships, sisters have much more intense feelings toward one another, both positive and negative, than brothers do or brothers and sisters do with each other.

Why would Jesus want to step into a minefield like that? Not only did he risk alienating one or both them, but in rendering his thoughts on their situation he alienated every older sister with a less responsible sister who has lived since. Some of you know what I'm talking about.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem. But first they take a little side trip to a little village called Bethany. There they spent some time in the home of a woman named Martha. Now I didn't say “Mary and Martha.” Luke tells us that this was Martha's house. Perhaps Martha was a widow. That might explain how she happened to own a house which was not common in that day. This also explains why Martha is often thought of as the older sister and the fact that she seems more responsible.

Anyway, Jesus visits Martha's house. Hospitality was big in Bible times and Martha was a person who took entertaining guests seriously. Especially entertaining Jesus. Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus were some of Jesus' closest friends. So she gladly opened her home to him.

Of course, that meant opening her home to his twelve disciples as well. This meant entertaining thirteen hungry men, at least twelve of whom were used to having women wait on them hand and foot. The disciples probably did very little to help. I was brought up where there was men's work and there was women's work. Men didn't help very much with cooking or cleaning. It was no different back then. Can you imagine the burden that Martha must have been under? She took pride in filling her role well. She wanted everything perfect as a host and as a housekeeper. Many of us really admire Martha. We can relate to her.

Well, Martha's sister Mary was evidently of a different temperament than Martha. In fact, she may have been a little rebellious. I say that because of something quite extraordinary that Mary did. We read these words about Mary “sitting at the Lord's feet listening to what he said,” and they don't seem too significant, except that she wasn't helping her older sister. Her actions may have had great significance.

In biblical times, to sit at a rabbi's feet meant that you were receiving formal training with him as his disciple. These teaching times involved only males. In other words, instead of helping her sister, Mary had gone off into the study for a teaching time with the men while Martha prepared the meal. That Jesus would encourage her to listen to him as he taught in the house was, in itself, radical. Women were openly despised by the Judaism of the time. Women were exempt from the study of the Torah. Many rabbis actively discouraged women from learning. So, Mary's actions of going in and sitting at Jesus' feet were really quite astonishing.

This was not what upset Martha, however. She was upset that Mary had left her to do all the work. Evidently this has happened before. Notice that she doesn't even bother to talk to Mary directly about her feelings. She probably knew that it wouldn't do any good. Instead, she went to Jesus. “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

It was a cry of frustration. It is the cry of every responsible person who has to pull more of the load because there are others who will not do their fair share. It happens not only in homes, but in the workplace, in civic organizations, and even the church. Some people seem to carry a heavier load simply because they are by nature more responsible, more reliable, more committed.

I don't believe for a moment that Jesus loved Mary more than Martha, nor did he treasure her devotion more than Martha's. Jesus knew that the world could not function without people like Martha. Our families certainly couldn't function without people like Martha. I know that our church couldn't function without people like Martha. Thank God for them and for her. I am sure Jesus appreciated Martha's efforts.

But this was an important time in Jesus' ministry. He knew something that Martha did not. He knew his time with them was short. There wouldn't be many more opportunities for them to be together. And so, with love in his eyes and a tender smile on his lips, Jesus said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

I believe Jesus was saying to Martha, "Martha, you have so many things on your mind, but right now I need you to focus on just one thing. There will be other times when Mary can help you with the house work. Right now I need for both of you to hear what I have to say about the Kingdom."

Jesus was not belittling Martha's role as the mistress of the house. If he had, he and his disciples would go hungry. He was simply saying that there is a time and a place for everything, and right now he needed them to focus on his mission from the Father. There is a time for work and a time for worship. That is what Christ is saying to us. A successful life is balanced.

We have some people who are all work. Some of them are quite successful professionally. And no wonder! They work eighty hours a week. They can show off a wonderful house, an expensive car, a cabin by the lake or in the mountains. But some of them have made this commitment to constant work at the cost of their souls, at the cost of their families, sometimes at the cost of their health. Certainly, they don't have time to worship. Often it is said that because they work so hard, Sunday is the only time they have for family, or to sleep in, or to relax. As if it is a virtue to neglect either faith or family because you work.

I am not knocking hard work. My motto is, "if I want something bad enough, I work for it." There is nothing wrong with hard work as long as it does not stand in the way of close relationships with other people and with God. There is a time for work and there is a time for worship. Someone said that "most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship. As a result, their meanings and values are distorted. Their relationships disintegrate faster than they can keep them in repair and their lifestyles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot."

There is more truth to that than we would like to admit. Worship is an essential part of a successful life. Regular worship produces satisfying lives. Regular worship produces healthier families. People who worship regularly live longer. If you have to choose between work and worship, choose worship.

This story of Jesus visiting Mary and Martha comes right after the Good Samaritan parable. The Good Samaritan is a parable about going and doing... And one gets to wonder about whether or not one can do and do and do all the time. Where does one stop for a moment for any refreshment, and what kind of refreshment ought it be to enable us to go back for more doing?

In the midst of all these New Testament stories about doing good work comes this little reminder to us that we need to take a break on a regular basis to sit at the feet of Jesus.