Choosing the Better Part
A Sermon by Rev. Diane Hutchins
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA
On July 19, 2015

Luke 10: 38-42

We are gathered at the feet of Jesus to learn what you expect of us, O God. We get caught up in busy activity and forget that what we need most is to wait patiently for your Word. Open our ears and our hearts that we might become mature in faith and responsible in action. Amen.

We have been reading Mark’s gospel together this summer and we have arrived at the place where Jesus feeds 5,000 with five small loaves of barley bread and two fish. The lectionary will stay with this story for six weeks, first from Mark’s account and then from John’s version. We’ll get there, but this week I am taking you on a side trip into the gospel according to Luke to read one of my favorite stories—the one about Martha and her sister Mary.

But you need to know where we are in Luke’s story so that you can understand what I think Luke is trying to tell us. In the Bible, as in real estate, it is location, location, location!

Near the end of chapter nine in Luke’s gospel, he departs from the story as we find it in Mark and Matthew and inserts a large section of material about Jesus that is found nowhere else. Luke begins it with the phrase: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51), and then he narrates the journey, which is more theological than geographical, as Jesus leads the disciples toward the cross.

The first thing that Jesus does is to send the 70 disciples—not just the 12 that we heard about in Mark, but 70 unnamed “others” out to minister in his name—to go out to cure the sick and announce that they have glimpsed the kingdom of God.

And then a lawyer stands up and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus doesn’t tell him, but asks him to repeat what he already knows, to summarize the law, and it’s the lawyer who says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27). And Jesus says to him, “Do that and you will live” (Luke 10:28).

In answer to the lawyer’s further question, “But who is my neighbor?”—lawyers are just never finished asking questions—Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan—which ends with Jesus saying to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

So, remembering all those instructions about doing things, I think we are ready to hear the lesson for today. Immediately after telling the lawyer to “go and do”, Luke offers us this story.

Listen for God’s word to you this day from Luke 10 beginning at verse 38.

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

In the interest of full disclosure, I must tell you that my reading of this lesson is overwhelmingly influenced by the fact that we have had a house full of company in the last several weeks. There was a ton of cooking and cleaning and planning before they came. We had a great week at the beach and another week of family time closer to home. It took me a week to get our household reassembled. All the beds were changed and the beach toys and towels have been de-sanded and safely packed away in the basement. And then they came back again this week. They are my favorite people and I look forward to this time of the year with so much joy, but if I can only see myself as Martha in this story, and I just can't understand why Jesus would scold her when all she was asking for was the help she needed, I want you to know, that I know my perspective might just be slightly askew.

For all the dinners that Jesus attends in Luke's gospel, there is scarcely a word about the preparation of those meals. How did Jesus expect dinner to happen? Did he think housework should just be done quietly and out of sight? That's not at all fair to Jesus. Surely it is the author of this gospel, Luke, who just has no interest in telling us about any domestic arrangements.

I don't know about you, but if Jesus were coming to dinner at our house, we would not be sending out for pizza. I would make the time to roll up these little bacon things that everybody loves for appetizers. (Do you think that Jesus would object to the bacon?) I would drag out those lovely, but fragile, antique dishes that can't go into the dishwasher, and, yes, I would be ironing those linen napkins that have been in the laundry basket since 1992. Hospitality would mean sharing the very best of all that I have—my things, my talents, and my time. I know who Martha is, and I love her.

Feminist theologians just hate this story.

They object to the way that Jesus seems to stir up animosity between the two women.

They object to the way that Jesus rebuffs assertive Martha merely for saying what she needs. They object to the way that Jesus supports submissive, silent, Mary—did you notice that Mary never says a word?

This is not the same sort of "learning at the feet" that Jesus did in the temple when he was a young child where he was busy asking questions and amazing the assembled rabbis with his understanding.

This is not the same sort of learning that traditional disciples did in noisy Hebrew schools, where there is constant debate and too many firm opinions.

In this story, Mary just sits. And she gets praised for doing nothing. It's what she doesn't do that begins the conversation, but the conversation is between Martha and Jesus. It's Martha's house. Mary is merely a silent observer.

It's Martha who gets the reputation for over-functioning. Her very name becomes a watchword in our culture for overdoing on the homemaking. Do you think Martha Stewart's mother gave her that name at birth? Was she predestined to channel her talents and ambitions into super homemaking because of the name that her parents gave her? Already being Martha, she became Martha. Or, did
some PR person advise her to change her name somewhere along the way because of the domestic associations that go with Martha?

Although I never did understand exactly why Martha Stewart went to jail, I do believe that Martha Stewart is inherently evil. Not for making money unethically in the stock market, it looks like lots of people have done that lately, and not many of them are in jail, but rather for making the rest of us feel inadequate about the hospitality that we can offer to our friends and relatives.

Her media empire has told us that if you invite people for a casual backyard picnic, they should expect the elegant spread that was on the cover of Martha’s magazine last month.

I’m afraid that too many people got the idea that if they couldn’t do it just right, if they couldn’t aspire to Martha’s vision of hospitality, they just wouldn’t welcome guests into their homes at all.

And we have had a serious decline in our culture of joyfully welcoming friends into our homes. “Let’s just meet at a restaurant and no one will have to decide what hospitality needs to include.” No one will have to clean the kitchen or tidy up the house or risk cooking something that one of the guests can’t eat. Instead of growing circles of friends who visit in each other’s homes and learn to really know each other, we have a “hospitality industry” ready to entertain us along with our various acquaintances in whatever surroundings we are willing to pay for.

Martha Stewart is guilty of perpetuating, and greatly enlarging, on the reputation that poor Martha, Mary’s sister, has had to contend with for the last two thousand years. Martha gets much better lines in John’s gospel, where she is the one who has the theological conversation with Jesus about the meaning of resurrection. Martha is the one who gets to say, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 11: 27). I hope that when she looked back to remembered Jesus in her own old age, it was that day that she remembered and dwelled on, and not this little unfinished story that Luke relates to us here.

Wouldn’t you like to know what happened next?

Do you think Martha may have stormed out of the house in a huff leaving everyone unfed and uncomfortable?

Or, do you see her sinking quietly into a place at the Lord’s feet, becoming as silent as Mary with no one remembering that they hadn’t had lunch?

Or, will another little boy show up with enough bread and fish in a basket for everyone? Already cooked.

Or, maybe Mary got up and helped Martha quickly so that they could both listen to Jesus and still offer him the hospitality of their home.

Maybe, Jesus himself got up to help and the three of them laughed together as they put the meal on the table.

But Luke leaves us with the moment frozen in time. He has already told us what he wants us to hear.

Luke tells us many stories about dinner parties.
He makes it clear that inviting Jesus to dinner was an inherently risky thing to do.

You never know who he might bring along with him—or who might pop in uninvited.

You never know what Jesus might say.

You never know who he might embarrass with his actions or his stories.

It must have been a risky thing for Martha to have invited Jesus. It says that it is Martha’s house—there is no mention of a brother or a husband or anyone else in the household. Jesus seems to be alone—there is at least no mention of the ever-present disciples who were there in the last scene and will return in the next. But for the moment, it’s just these two women who have welcomed Jesus into their private home—and have his undivided attention.

I think Martha must have known Jesus well and have felt incredibly comfortable with his presence in order to feel brave enough to interrupt his conversation with her needs. I can imagine voicing that kind of complaint to family—to folks who are engrossed in the football game on Thanksgiving and have abandoned me to get the dinner on the table by myself, who I know will come as soon as I announce that I’ve got to have help—right now. But I can’t imagine saying that kind of thing to guests who are enjoying their conversation in our home. I think Martha must have expected both of them to respond to her plea with, “of course, of course, so sorry we weren’t paying attention.” But when you invite Jesus in, you have to expect the unexpected.

Eugene Peterson has translated Jesus’ response in this new way: “Martha, dear Martha, you’re fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it’s the main course and won’t be taken from her.”1 Luke is reminding us that the most important thing—the only essential thing—is always God’s word: “We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3).

Martha has let the many urgent things in her day overwhelm the one really important thing.

In the preface to a book of advice to his own nephew, the Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen, begins by apologizing for being so slow to respond to his nephew with these words:

> It was difficult to get down to it, because there always seemed to be something more urgent to attend to. However, if I were to let my life be taken over by what is urgent, I might very well never get around to what is essential.2

How easy it is to let our lives get taken up by all those urgent things. Getting dinner on the table, getting the bills paid, getting the plumbing fixed, and the car inspected and the grass cut. The urgent stuff of life is never finished. There is always more that needs to be done. But making time for the important stuff—for building relationships with family, for spending time in prayer, for setting aside this time to be here to worship God—to remember who you are and remember whose you are—that is the better part—that is the main course in the feast that is life—everything else is a side dish.

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It's not that Jesus is scolding Martha for her efforts at hospitality; it's that he needs to remind her—and all of us—to keep our priorities in balance. In order to be nourished and strengthened to go and do as Jesus continually commands us, we need to take time to sit and listen; to listen to the Word and to listen for the Word in prayer and in silence.

The good news is that Jesus, not Martha, is really the host, and he grants permission for all of us distracted and worried people to sit down and eat our fill of word and promise. When we nourish ourselves with the Word, we'll be ready to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our strength, and with all our minds, and our neighbors as ourselves. We'll be ready then to go and do as Jesus commands.