

“A Heaping Helping of Guilt”

Luke 10:38-42

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Frankfort, Kentucky

July 17, 2016

This morning our attention is drawn to a story which has more twists and turns than a mountain road. It is filled with surprises because the main characters have an uncanny way of not doing what you think they will do, or what you think they should do. Listen as I describe the details.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem and unexpectedly stopped at the home of Mary and Martha. These sisters are mentioned in the Fourth Gospel in conjunction with the death of their brother, Lazarus. You recall Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, which was a contributing factor in Jesus' crucifixion days later. The High Priest was fearful Jesus was becoming too popular and powerful and made it clear he wanted Jesus arrested.

When Jesus and the disciples arrived at Martha's home, she took the initiative to invite them in and prepare a meal. There was nothing unusual about these kind gestures, especially for Luke. Showing hospitality to friends and strangers was a major theme in his book, and since Martha was probably older, she took the lead.

What was unusual, however, was what Mary did. She did not follow Martha to the kitchen to help her prepare the meal, but she sat at Jesus' feet like a student or disciple, soaking up every word.

This did not sit well with Martha, and she decided to do something about it. She went to the room where Mary was, but instead of speaking directly to her, she appealed to Jesus to tell Mary to come and help her.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

I get the feeling Martha was as upset with Jesus as she was Mary. Actually, she might have been more upset with him. Why else would she serve Jesus a heaping helping of guilt?

Did Jesus acquiesce? Surprisingly, no. Jesus took Mary’s side in this dispute, even though this seemed out of character for him.

“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.”

Jesus was gentle, but firm with Martha. He left no doubt about what he felt Mary needed to be doing and no room for negotiation.

So, what happened? Did Mary get up anyway and go help Martha, or did she continue listening to Jesus? Did Martha voice her disapproval with Jesus and Mary or just leave the room in a huff and return to finish the meal? Did one of the disciples break with tradition as Mary did and help Martha?

We don’t know; Luke doesn’t tell us. Evidently, he did not go to the Paul Harvey School of Story Telling where he would have been taught to tell “the rest of the story.”

The most intriguing part of this story for me is found in the words of Jesus to Martha when he said, “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.”

What made Mary’s part better that day? Let me begin by saying I don’t believe what Martha did was bad. She is to be commended for graciously welcoming Jesus and the disciples into her home and preparing a meal, which required a lot of hard work.

While I am at it, I’ll also tell you that all of us are both Martha and Mary. At times, we are busy with tasks, and at other times we are more sedate and reflective. Knowing when we need to be more like Martha or more like Mary is the key to understanding this story.

Having said this, what made Mary's part better on that particular day? She took advantage of an opportunity that would never come her way again. Mary set aside hundreds of years of religious and cultural traditions to sit at the feet of Jesus listening to him teach instead of taking her rightful place in the kitchen with Martha. Why did she do this?

In all likelihood, this would be the final time Jesus would be in Mary's home. The full weight of the cross was bearing down upon him now that he was on the outskirts of Jerusalem and Passover was near.

Days before, Jesus told the disciples he was going to be betrayed into the hands of his enemies and killed. Mary either heard what Jesus said or sensed there was danger in the air.

Either way, she did not want to be cooking and cleaning during what appeared to be Jesus' last visit to her home. Instead, she chose to sit at his feet soaking up every word he was saying while offering support and encouragement through her very presence.

I dare say all of us would spend this day differently if we knew it would be the last time we would see one another. Things which were so important to us before we became aware of our final time together would all of a sudden not be as important. They would be replaced by the desire to express our deepest feelings.

Perhaps Luke wanted his readers to live each day like this. Recalling this story was one way he could remind his readers to live in the moment, the precious present, responding to every opportunity that would come their way to help others, express gratitude, show love and support, feed their own spirit and grow in their understanding of the mysteries of life and faith.

I don't believe we can fully grasp the significance of this passage until we put it in its context. Where does Luke place it in his gospel? It comes on the heels of the story of the Good Samaritan.

What made the Samaritan good, at least better than the priest and Levite in the story? He seized an opportunity to help a stranger who had been robbed, beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. He carved time out of his busy day to stop and save this man's life. He took

money out of his own pocket to pay for his medical care. He did not let this opportunity to be a good neighbor pass him by.

Neither did Mary. She knew there was something special about this visit to her home by Jesus. It was not ordinary by any means. She sensed this and refused to go on with business as usual.

How do you think she felt about this decision when she sat a few days later at the foot of the cross? I am confident she was grateful she sat at his feet listening to every word he spoke, offering support and encouragement.

I suspect Martha finally understood why Jesus said what he did when he took Mary's side in their dispute. His rebuke took on new meaning for her after the crucifixion, didn't it?

To be a disciple of Jesus means we live every day poised and ready to seize opportunities to draw close to God and one another. We never pass up an opportunity to be a good friend and neighbor. We don't cross to the other side of the road to avoid someone who needs our help, and we don't let the worries and cares of life distract us from our true mission and purpose in life, to be the presence of Christ in a broken and hurting world.

This is a challenge for all of us, isn't it? Life is full of responsibilities, worries and cares which consume us and demand all our time and energy. How easy it is to become self-absorbed and unaware of what is going on around us. How quickly we become frustrated with interruptions or anyone who doesn't do what we think they should.

Hopefully, we see how this story speaks to us about this. Sure, life is filled with responsibilities, worries and cares. It always will be, but it is also full of opportunities to do good things for others and even ourselves.

Who can help us to see these opportunities and to take advantage of them? Whose help do we need to be more like the Good Samaritan and Mary, recognizing the "one thing" which needs to be done above all else? God can, and God will if we ask.

God knows some of the hardest decisions we make are not between good and bad choices, but competing good choices. These are the ones that keep us awake at night. We want to do both, and we agonize over which ones will be left undone.

So, how do we resolve this tension? I have begun asking four questions to help with my struggle.

What does God need me to do now as an agent of grace and change? What do others need from me at this moment that can make a difference in their lives? What do I need at this time that will feed my spirit and strengthen me along my journey? What cannot wait for a response at a later date because the opportunity will soon pass and never come again?

Then, I listen to my heart. I listen to others. I listen for the Spirit.

After listening, I take the path that leads to peace of mind. In retrospect, I often feel I 'chose the better part'.

How many opportunities to be a good friend, neighbor and family member passed you by last week? Looking back, what would you do differently? What do you need to do this week to seize the opportunities which will come your way?

The stories of the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha are all about timing and flexibility.

They are about seeing through eyes of faith what is most important in a busy schedule.

They are about taking advantage of opportunities for service and growth which will never come your way again.

They are about living in the moment and not being held hostage to tradition, a to-do list or selfishness.

They are about letting the Holy Spirit speak to you.

They are about responding to the nudging of the Spirit as God leads you to put aside your agenda or apron for a season.

Some of you recall the 1989 movie, "Dead Poets Society," starring Robin Williams as Professor Keating at a Vermont preparatory school for boys. Mr. Keating was not like other teachers at the aristocratic Welton Academy. His teaching methods were new and controversial for 1959.

On the first day of class, Mr. Keating ushered his students into the hall where they stood around the glass case containing the pictures of former classmates and professors, most of whom were dead. He made it appear as if the people in the pictures were talking when he repeatedly whispered, "Carpe Diem," or "seize the day."

"One day," Mr. Keating said, "you, too, will be fodder for worms. Make your life count before that time comes!"

Listen as the Holy Spirit whispers "carpe diem" in your ear this week and seize your opportunity.