



“When Hard Work Doesn’t Cut It”

Preaching Text: Luke 10:38-42

21 July 2013: 9th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC of Arlington, Texas 76011

When we invite someone over to watch a ballgame, then it is best if we provide a ballgame to watch. Likewise when you ask someone over to taste some fine barbeque ribs, then you better have the cooker cranked up. When Martha welcomed Jesus into her home for dinner, she offered to Jesus and his disciples an implied contractual obligation to provide a meal—and cooking a meal takes work. If this is all true, then why does Jesus seem to criticize Martha when he says, “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.” Hear the day’s lesson from Luke:

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 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.” 41 But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38-42).

Luke tells the story as if the reader/hearer is to favor Mary over her sister Martha. It is easy for the task-oriented among us to discount sitting and listening over and against doing and working. Perhaps this story reminds us about what we miss when “we are all work and no reflection/prayer/ learning/contemplation.” Martha’s works imply, and perhaps the story tells us, we should be more like Mary. Being busy is rather easy for most of us! And we know Jesus sometimes says stuff when we are not listening to him that we are glad we did not hear . . . “love your enemies,” “turn the other cheek,” “let the dead bury the dead,” and “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich one to enter into the kingdom of God.”

Yet, maybe we set up a false contrast. Maybe Luke suggests both work and



reflection, both labor for Jesus and listening to Jesus are needed. One of Aristotle's best-known fragments of ethical thinking philosophers calls the "Means—Extremes" concept in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. In a nutshell, Aristotle wrote that virtues are a point of balance between two opposite vices. For example, the virtue "courage" lies between the two vices of cowardice and recklessness. Recklessness is too much confidence and not enough fear, cowardice is too much fear and not enough confidence, courage is just the right amount of each. In fact Aristotle expands this idea to most virtues and vices. Another example of "Means—Extremes" that Aristotle coined was temperance (or self-control), which lies between self-indulgence and a lack of sensitivity to your own needs, and modesty which is between bashfulness and vanity.

I am suggesting, with respect to the story of Mary and Martha which taken along with the previous story (parable of the Good Samaritan), that we see that a balance in the Christian life always exists. Sometimes we put the one beaten and robbed on our beast and take him/her to an inn. Sometimes we sit at Jesus' feet and listen to the master as we learn of and worship God.

A variation of the following story appears in Anthony De Mello's little book called *The Song of the Bird*.

[1] A boat docked in a tiny Mexican village. An American tourist complimented the Mexican fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took him to catch them. "Not very long," answered the fisherperson.

"Well, then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more?" asked the American.

The fisherperson explained that his small catch was sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family. The American asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

"I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take a siesta with my wife. In the evenings, I go into the village to see my friends, play the guitar, and sing a few songs. I have a full life."

The American interrupted, "I have an MBA from Harvard and I can help you! You should start by fishing longer every day. You can then sell the extra fish you catch. With the extra revenue, you can buy a bigger boat. With the extra money the larger boat will bring, you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet of trawlers. Instead of selling your fish to a middle man, you can negotiate directly with the processing plants and maybe even open your own plant. You can then leave this little village and move



to Mexico City, Los Angeles, or even New York City! From there you can direct your huge enterprise.”

“How long would that take” asked the fisherperson?

“Twenty, perhaps twenty-five years,” replied the American. “And after that?”

“Afterwards? That’s when it gets really interesting,” answered the American, laughing. “When your business gets really big, you can start selling stocks and make millions!”— “Millions? Really? And after that?”

“After that you’ll be able to retire, live in a tiny village near the coast, sleep late, play with your children, catch a few fish, take siestas with your wife, and spend your evenings drinking and enjoying your friends.”

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[2] Imagine life is a game in which you are juggling five balls. The balls are called work, family, health, friends and integrity. And you’re keeping all of them in the air. But one day you finally come to understand that work is a rubber ball. If you drop it, it will bounce back.

The other four balls—family, health, friends, integrity—are made of glass. If you drop one of these, it will be irrevocably scuffed, nicked, perhaps even shattered. And once you truly understand the lesson of the five balls, you will have the beginnings of balance in your life (From James Patterson’s *Suzanne’s Diary For Nichola*; Submitted by S.S., Age 14, North Dakota).

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My friend, Guy Ames, relates this story some six years ago:

[3] Years ago, as I traveled through Nepal, I had an opportunity to drive up into the Himalayas early one morning to watch the sun rise. Our tour had been long and I was tired and feeling sick, so the morning of the early tour I pulled the covers over my head and went back to sleep. I’ve always regretted that decision. I had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see the sun rise over the highest mountain range in the world, and I passed it up because I was sleepy. Mary wouldn’t pass up the most important thing: spending time with the Master.

I wonder what would happen to the church if we placed as much importance on spending time with the Master as Mary did. I wonder what would happen to committees and classes and teams and ministry if we sought to spend as much time in listening prayer and hearing the words of Christ as we do in getting the job done. (Guy Ames—adapted from *The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2007*).

Maybe Luke’s Jesus reminds us that we each need balance between action/reflection.