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Breaking the Rules, Part 2:  
Choosing the Better Part  
Luke 10:38-42  
July 22, 2007

If you were not able to be here last week, please do not fret by the phrase, Part 2, in the sermon title. The message today, found in these five verses of Luke, does not require understanding of the prior story, though what I suggested last week and am continuing today is the idea that a fuller meaning of both stories emerges when they are considered together.

Last week we read part 1, the story of the Good Samaritan, which begins with a sincere exchange between Jesus and a lawyer. The very first question the lawyer asks Jesus is, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus and the lawyer begin to answer that question together with the words from Leviticus and Deuteronomy about loving God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. And when the lawyer asks the follow-up question: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story of the Samaritan that most of you probably know by heart, even if you didn’t attend Sunday school or vacation bible school as a child. And after telling the story, Jesus says to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.” Go and show mercy to a stranger and become a neighbor by your deeds, not your address.

And instead of leaving you with that command, a life’s worth of work on its own, I said what Luke implies- ‘That’s only the half of it!’

So now we’re caught up to speed. We are still considering the lawyer’s original question. He wants to know what is required to live as one seeking life in its eternal fullness, whatever that means. Isn’t that why we’re all here today? We’ve chosen the Christian life, and now are trying to figure out what the heck that means. How do we make the abstract concrete? How do

we reorient our lives around this concept of eternal life, or around the person, Jesus, whom we call our Savior?

Well, for one thing, we know that we are called to perform acts of kindness and compassion- not necessarily world-saving acts- but to concretely reach out our hands to another. Yet Jesus does not command us only to action, because action alone would eventually find us worn out, stretched to our physical, emotional, and spiritual limits. And when we are worn out, stretched out, pushed to the limits, we are likely to become resentful, bitter and apathetic. That is why we cannot follow the Good Samaritan as our only example of living the Christian life to the fullest.

Enter Mary and Martha...

Martha, Martha. The original Martha Stewart, she is. When Jesus comes to town, Martha goes all out. Running about the house, making sure the cut flowers are properly arranged in their vases, the floors swept clean and immaculate, the sheets ironed and tucked meticulously into the mattress, cinnamon sticks simmering on the stovetop so the house will smell delicious. Maybe she's wearing her favorite apron, heels and pearls. What world-weary traveler wouldn't stop at her house if given the option? I consider my hospitality above and beyond if I have a chance to scrub the toilets and run a comb through my hair before guests arrive. Someone once told me that you know who your closest friends are when you don't feel compelled to clean when they visit. So I only invite my close friends over!

Needless to say, Martha existed on a whole other realm of hospitality. In fact, Martha extended hospitality in a way that placed her in line for the blessing that goes to those who receive Jesus. Jesus says in chapter 9 of Luke, "Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who

sent me.” She is on track for the blessing, though it would be my guess that she goes all out for pretty much anyone. What a marvel.

And then there’s Mary, her sister. Staying at Martha’s house while she contemplates her next poor job decision. Unable to keep an apartment for long, she takes advantage of her sister’s hospitality and the opportunity to sleep between those ironed sheets, borrow her sister’s shoes and jewelry- basically be a leech. While Martha is in the kitchen, preparing an elaborate meal to feed her guest, Mary wanders into the living room in jeans and a ratty old t-shirt. She sees Jesus, is enthralled by the presence of this teacher, and sits down at his feet to listen to whatever he has to say.

Martha is obviously perturbed, to put it lightly, to see her sister lounging on the floor at Jesus’ feet, instead of helping her in the kitchen. You can hear the clicking of her heels on the floor as she marches into the living room, hands on hips, glaring down at her sister. She appeals to Jesus, he’ll understand you know. He’s the one who said all those things about hospitality. He’ll make Mary get up and get into the kitchen to help out.

But then... Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” It must have been quite a blow to Martha. Maybe she felt the wind knocked out of her to have Jesus siding with her lazy, good-for-nothing sister. In what kind of alternate universe had she found herself?

And what are we to think, reading this story, thinking about Martha’s due diligence and careful attentiveness, and Jesus’ rejection of her efforts? She is doing exactly as Jesus commanded, and in some ways resembles the Good Samaritan- being a neighbor, offering hospitality, reaching out a hand to offer an act of kindness.

The truth is, there's a lot to be confused about in this story. It's not totally clear what Jesus means by saying that 'one thing is needful.' Does he mean that Martha shouldn't be preparing a four course meal, but only a simple, hearty stew? Or that her efforts are all together excessive and superfluous? That's a hard pill to swallow, thinking that Martha's efforts, done with such sincerity and enthusiasm, would be rejected by the one for whom she's doing them.

But we can start with this: Jesus commends Mary because her choice is to sit still and listen. This is the better part that she has chosen. To sit at the feet of the teacher, take time in contemplation, reflect and be quiet. This is the yin and yang of these two stories: the Good Samaritan models the command to Go and Do; Mary models the command to Sit Still and Listen. Action and contemplation. Giving and receiving. Breathing in and breathing out.<sup>1</sup>

And in the way that the Good Samaritan breaks the rules by reaching out to a stranger without knowing his ethnicity, in a world where ethnic boundaries were thick and impenetrable; Mary breaks the rules as a woman, sitting at the feet of Jesus, a position reserved for disciples. She breaks the rules of hospitality to be present with her guest, to choose the Bread of life over earthly nourishment.

And this is all well and good, but I am hesitant to leave Martha behind so quickly, to jump on the Mary bandwagon and abandon all that hard work that made Martha a disciple in her own right.

Surely Luke and Jesus are not suggesting that Martha's ministry of hospitality is unimportant. Food figures so prominently in Jesus' life and ministry as recorded in the Gospels. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a living example of the prominence of nourishment, both bodily and spiritual, in our faith. Can you imagine First Presbyterian Church without Jackie Fike, James Hollander and the dedicated kitchen volunteers? Can you imagine a vital and

energetic church that never fed its members or celebrated with receptions and picnics? Can you imagine an outreach ministry that did not involve feeding the hungry? Of course not. But the church has to be careful that it offers both sources of nourishment, the nourishment of a shared meal and the Word of God, our bread of life. Because if we get too caught up in our efforts to be hospitable, we will become harried, frazzled, stressed out and, like Martha, we'll miss out on the presence of God, right there in front of us. This is what had happened to the community about whom Amos is talking, though that might be giving them more credit than they deserve. They were so far removed from God's Word to them that they whined and complained every time the calendar dictated that they had to serve the poor. They begged for the holiday to end, and the Sabbath to be over, so that they could go back to selling their wares at exorbitant rates, and defrauding the poor. They claimed to be religious people, but in name only. They had lost the conviction for action, because they had stopped taking time for contemplation. They were messing it up on both ends, and God was disappointed, to say the least.

Another part of my defense of Martha reveals my own inclinations; my own preference for the active life rather than the contemplative life. I read an article by Chris Rice, a man who spent much of his adult life in Jackson, Mississippi, working towards racial justice and co-authoring a book entitled *More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel*. He is action-oriented, and identifies himself as much more Martha than Mary. In writing about this story in Luke, he says,

One of the most profound but openly disregarded distinctives of Christian lifestyle is that one day of every seven we are commanded to cease, rest and worship. And what is prayer but unproductivity, a waste of time that could be better spent controlling and influencing people and events directly?

He continues,

It is disturbing to be still and let God be God. Self-worth can plummet. Standing may be lost in other's eyes. We may see at what cost we have ignored the people closest to us, even our own soul. For who are we without our activism, apart from our busyness?

... Our activism can become a form of idolatry... We become a mile wide in frantic activity and an inch deep in clarity, peacefulness, and effectiveness.<sup>2</sup>

I share this with you because if I had to make an educated guess, I would say that the vast majority of you here today are massive overachievers! You work hard, demand a lot from yourself and those around you, and probably become exasperated by the idea of imitating Mary in her stillness. Who has time to sit still? And how can sitting still and listening possibly be as holy and sacred as serving, as taking action to make things happen? Is Jesus asking us to exchange serving the homeless for sitting cross-legged on a pillow? In a sense, yes. Jesus commends Mary for knowing how to prioritize; for weighing the options and choosing the better part. She knew, in that moment, that the best and only place to be was the foot of Jesus. And Martha, for all her good intentions, was too caught up in her own head to see the opportunity before her. She was too distracted and anxious to see the best thing she could do was stop and breathe, sit and listen.

Yet Fred Craddock warns us not to criticize Martha too harshly or commend Mary too profusely, because we will only end up swinging the pendulum from one side to the other.<sup>3</sup> Remember, these verses come directly after the illustration of the Good Samaritan, where the one thing needed is an act of mercy. To sit at the feet of Jesus and only listen is just as problematic as forgetting to sit and listen.

Where is the substance in all that action if you don't take the time to sit and reflect? How can we be a Christian people who barely has time to pray, or don't see the benefits of prayer? How are we going to live out the Word of God if we don't take the time to hear and read and

contemplate the Word of God? Are we going to place our Bibles under our pillows and hope for the Word of God to enter our brains through osmosis- the way we did with our chemistry and history textbooks in high school? Where will the fulfillment and peace come from, if we spend so much time running that our feet hurt, and so much time talking that our jaws are sore and our brain aches?

I ask you these questions, as if I know the answer and embody it already. But I am more Martha than Mary, more likely to be feeding the homeless than sitting in prayer, or marching in a political protest than taking a quiet retreat. The truth is that we must find a balance of action and contemplation, for our own sakes as well as for God's sake. Probably we all find ourselves drawn more to one part of this story than the other. For those of us who are action-oriented, we must find a way to slow down and to appreciate the absolute necessity of contemplation. Likewise, those of us who are more contemplation-oriented must find a way to live out the fruits of our contemplation in deeds.

Extravagant devotion then becomes as radical as doing justice, just as much a discipline... and it carries just as much transformational power. For it was not in the bustling marketplace or among the teeming crowds, but in the desert and garden, alone, that Jesus faced dark temptation, heard and wrestled with the deepest voice and will of God, put self aside, and internalized the way forward.<sup>4</sup>

Loving God and living the Christian life means choosing a radical lifestyle that involves breaking the rules. Breaking the rules of who we learn from, whom we serve, how we act, and how we receive God's grace in the quietest of moments. It is equal parts action and contemplation, neither of which comes easy in the frantic pace of life that we live. No time to

help the stranger on the side of the road, no time to set aside our tasks to sit at the feet of our Lord.

If we were going to decide this morning to begin to seek out that balance between action and contemplation, this would be a great day. In a moment, we will celebrate the sacrament of Baptism. As we say in our liturgy, baptism is not only for the ones being baptized, and their families, it is for all of us. Baptism includes both the action and contemplation. We watch the water poured out into the font and the children anointed. And while this takes place, we remember our own Baptisms, not the physical memory, which would be pretty hard for those of you who were baptized as infants, but the spiritual memory. Of remembering that Jesus was the first to be baptized, by his cousin John, when God descended in a dove and said, ‘This is my son, in whom I am well pleased.’ Before Jesus had begun his ministry, before he had become the teacher and savior that we know today. Even then, he was beloved. And we are beloved as well, regardless of how often we stop to pray or stop to help a stranger in our midst. Our baptism is not an affirmation of what we have already done, but of everything that comes after, in thought and deed. And everything that comes after, as we strive for equal parts action and contemplation, is done in grateful thanks for that grace.

If we were to finally ask Jesus, “Which is the better part? To go and do, or to sit and listen?” Jesus would probably respond- YES.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Frank T. Griswold, *Sermon for Proper 11*. Day 1: A Ministry of the Alliance for Christian Media, July 22, 2001. <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=166>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Rice. *Choosing the Better Part*. Sojourners Magazine, July-August 1999. <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9907&article=990761>.

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock. *Luke: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Rice.

<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Craddock.