

# PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

## DISCIPLESHIP – THE BETTER PART?

Luke 10: 38-42 July 18, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

“Now as they went on their way, Jesus 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 Jesus 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 Jesus 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.”

I believe we have to see this story in Luke in context. It immediately follows the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus ends that story by asking the lawyer who proved to be neighbor to the one in need. He answered, “The one who showed kindness.” Jesus responded, “Go and do likewise.” Discipleship is found in doing, in acting, in kindness to those in need.

Jesus and the disciples are welcomed into her home by Martha. The name, Martha, means the lady of the house.” Hospitality is important, so she sets about getting some food ready for Jesus and the 12 disciples. It is a task. Mary, sister of Martha, sits at the feet of Jesus to listen to him. Martha is discouraged because she is left with all the work. She asks Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help her. But Jesus refuses, in a kind way, and answers that Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken away from her. Discipleship is sitting and the feet of Jesus and listening and learning.

Discipleship – be like the Good Samaritan – go and do kindness.

Discipleship – be like Mary, listen and learn.

Where do you find yourself in these stories? I am basically a Martha. I want to get the task done, set goals, achieve purpose. I see discipleship out there in the world helping those in need. I do like structure and plan things out. I still make a list of things to do. Beginning on Monday, I try to accomplish the tasks for the week that I have listed. And if I perceive one of them to be a difficult task, I try to finish that task first. I am like Martha. I want to get things done. But there is a part of me that is Mary also. I do enjoy study, reading books, and being alone. I spent the better part of an hour trying to figure out what this “only one thing is needful” in the text for today. Dealing with the Greek doesn’t really help all that much. Is the one needful thing Jesus is referring to “only one dish of hot dogs is necessary, we don’t really need all the fries and other dishes.” Or, is the one needful thing to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen? Is “one thing” a single dish or is it a spiritual goal. It is really ambiguous as to how to translate. I do like working on that. A part of me is like Mary.

Martha is distracted by her many tasks and she is worried about having enough food for her guests. Distracted. The Greek word “perispaomai” means “pulled in all directions.” Martha is upset because she has more to do than she can do. Isn’t that a great description of much of our living in our own day? What sort of world requires a law against texting while driving a car?

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Is our job so important that we don't have time for parenting? 99% of Americans believe in God. 41% make it to worship on any given Sunday. Worldly attitude – distracted by many tasks. That description is one to which we need to pay attention. For years, this text for today was interpreted to prioritize the contemplative life over the active life. The “better” life was the life of prayer and contemplation. The quiet life was seen as “more perfect” than the active life. I doubt this position can be defended very long. The story does not necessarily affirm the contemplative over the active life. The Greek word “better part” can be translated as “good.” Mary has chosen the good part, meaning she has chosen the connection to God who is good, the ground of energy of effective action. God is both in our contemplation and in our action. In our contemplation, God sustains us while summoning us to work and through our service, to bring about a world of justice, mercy, and peace. Or discipleship is not an either/or, a contemplative/active. Discipleship is a both/and message.

Good Samaritan. “Go and do likewise.” It was the most unlikely character in the story who proved to be neighbor. It was the Samaritan – the outcast, the one on the fringe of society that we are told to emulate. And the message for discipleship is clear – “go and do likewise.”

Mary. She has chosen the good part. She sits at the feet of the Rabbi from Nazareth to listen and learn. Unlikely? Yes. In that society, Jesus could have answered Martha by asking Mary to go help with the task of fixing the food. That was the “place” of women in that day. But Jesus again chooses the unlikely – “let Mary be. It is good for her, for women to listen and learn. And the message for discipleship is clear. Sit at the feet of Jesus and listen and learn.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence,  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I...

I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference. (Robert Frost)

Do we really have to choose between the contemplative and active life?

I would say we are a mixture of Mary and Martha. Our contemplation will lead us into meaningful, redemptive service – for ourselves and our society. If we are content to only study, to contemplate – they we will hear the words of James speaking to us, “Faith without works is dead.” If we immerse ourselves in “Working out our salvation” with no thought or time to consider the call of God to our lives, we will become as lost as the world in which we live. Why we do acts of kindness is as important as the act itself. When we gather to worship each Sunday, we move from our places of being “worried and distracted by many things” to one where we are in touch with the one thing needed, the good part that will not be taken away. We light our candles on the altar each Sunday to remind ourselves that we have gathered in the presence of God. At the end of each service, that light is taken from the altar to lead us into the world in faithful service. That light we take out is a symbol that the God present with us in worship will be present with us in our living out our discipleship in the world. At worship, we hear Jesus saying, “Martha, take off your apron and sit down. Dinner can wait a few minutes. Let's talk together. Can we do that?” We take the light from the altar out of the sanctuary as a symbol that our call of Christ is always, “Go, and do likewise.”