

“THE DISTRACTION OF DIRTY DISHES”

Luke 10:38-42

August 6, 2017

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

1) When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, Luke portrays this in a very dramatic way. James, John and Peter had been out fishing on a boat, when Jesus called them to come and follow him. Luke writes, “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

Imagine them dropping their nets in the boats, some hanging over the edge, a few fish flopping around on the wet wood, the oars sticking up out of the water, sliding up, then down, as the lake waves rocked the boat.

When Jesus called Matthew from his tax collector booth, Luke again writes, “And he got up, left everything, and followed him.” The bills and the coins in the cash box still under the wooden tabletop. Customers left waiting in line, needing Matthew’s tax stamp so they could sell their goods in the city. He walks out, doesn’t even turn his “open” sign over to “closed,” so that the folks still waiting imagine he’ll be coming back in a few minutes.

We don’t read about them complaining to Jesus, “Hey, who’s going to buy my kids’ supper if I can’t sell these blankets in the market?” We don’t hear Zebedee, James and John’s father, yelling, “Where are you boys going? Are you going to leave me alone to take care of your mother? I can’t catch enough fish by myself!”

How different their dramatic response to Jesus’ invitation to follow him would be if we could have heard the other side.

Mary had a lot in common with Matthew, Peter, James and John. So, too, had she left everything and followed him. The difference was that she had left the dishes in the sink, the dirt on the floor, her sister to do the work, and followed him to the next room.

Unlike Zebedee left alone on a boat, or the peasants in line at the tax booth, Martha speaks up. “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

Martha thought Jesus would back her up. Not only had Mary left Martha with the dishes in the sink so she could follow Jesus to the next room, Mary was breaking a social taboo. It was the prerogative of men after a meal to leave the table, retire to another room and discuss the affairs of faith, or business, or war. Mary broke into a men’s club when she sat at Jesus’ feet. Martha had every right to think Jesus would back her up and send her lazy sister back in the kitchen. Everyone else would have sent her back to the kitchen – who ever heard of a woman sitting at the feet of the Messiah.

Surprisingly, Jesus doesn’t. Instead, he praises Mary for choosing to sit at his feet listening to his teaching. “Martha,” he says, “you are worried and distracted about many things, but there’s just one important thing. Mary has chosen well.” Martha with the soapy dishtowel hanging at her wrist must have dropped her jaw along with the towel.

Jesus seems to rebuke Martha for complaining about her sister. Taken by itself the passage would seem to command all of us to forget about the little chores around the house and office, just pray, read scripture and spend time with God. But the passage shouldn’t be taken by itself. Maybe that’s why it’s at the end of the Good Samaritan story. So we would read both of them together. Disciples of Jesus should “Go and do” like the Good Samaritan. They should also “Sit and listen” like Mary. (Notice that both heroes are outsiders – an ethnic enemy and a woman in a solidly man’s world.)

Jesus' comments were not meant as a repudiation of working chores. We know from John's Last Supper narrative that on the night Jesus was betrayed that he did the very things Martha wanted him to make Mary do. Jesus took a towel, a wash basin and cleaned his disciples' feet. Then, he instructs his disciples to be servants to each other and to all others in his name.

So, why does he rebuke Martha for doing the work of a servant?

I think the key comes in verse 40, "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks..." There is a parallel to the story of the Rich Young Ruler – Luke 18 – Jesus tells the man to sell everything he has, give it to the poor, and follow him. But the man walks away sad, because he was very rich.

Just as the young man was distracted from following Jesus completely because of his riches, so Martha was distracted by her many tasks.

She was torn between listening to Jesus, as Mary was doing, and finishing the household chores assigned to women in that day. Mary made the choice; she was going to sit at Jesus' feet. Practical Martha couldn't stand to sit listening to him until she had the kitchen spotless again. Her home, her hospitality, was her pride. That came first. Maybe he should have said it plainer to her, "Martha, leave the dirty dishes and follow me."

Now, I know some of you wish Jesus would say that to you, but to Martha it meant to sacrifice who she was.

2) When Stephen Covey wrote the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the ideas he borrowed was from President Eisenhower, who once said, "What is important is seldom urgent, and what is urgent is seldom important." Eisenhower's statement can create a matrix based on two axes – urgency and importance – which divides time into 4 quadrants: things important and urgent (crisis), things not important and not urgent (distractions), things urgent, but not important (interruptions), and things important, but not urgent (planning). Covey said that most people spend most of their time on interruptions – things urgent but not important. These are the things that have to be done everyday to live life. To cook and clean, bathe and eat, answer email and return phone calls, chores around the house and deadlines at work. If we are not careful we have so many of these that we bounce from one thing to the next without ever giving life much thought. We can navigate life by nothing more than where the winds of emails and texts, work deadlines and children's schedules take us. It is easy to become creatures of habit rather than persons of self-determination.

Eisenhower thought that the best place to spend your time was on important, non-urgent matters. These are things like building relationships, thinking, planning, exercising, praying, contemplating. They are the things we tell ourselves we would do if we only had more time. We talk about doing them, but let them fall off our calendars because they are not urgent. Exercise doesn't send you an email asking you to respond in two or three ways. Prayer doesn't text you reminding you of a work deadline. Contemplating your life, what you want to do, what you should do, does not call you on the phone and make you feel guilty for neglecting it. So, we let those things go, while we spend our time on less important but urgent matters.

When we create space in our lives to build relationships and think and pray and exercise and contemplate matters we become people of vision, perspective, discipline and purpose. To do that we have to say "No" to other less important things. And that's what we've all done this morning. We've said no to other things and come to worship, where we will re-engage in relationships, pray, think and contemplate about life and how we are going to live it.

It's what Mary did that day when the dishes still needed to be cleaned. There's a time to clean the dirty dishes, and there's a time to leave them soaking in the sink so you can sit and listen, think and pray. Wisdom is knowing when to clean them and when to leave them.

That's true in faith. That's true in life. That's true in business.

Martha thought she and her sister were going to serve Jesus, to feed him, to give him drink and rest. Jesus wanted Martha to know that he came to serve her and her sister, Mary – to feed them the bread of heaven, drink living water and rest from their weariness.

May God help us be busy doing the things that have to be done, when it's time to work. And may God help us sit down to pray and think and listen when it's time for Jesus to serve us with the abundance of eternal life. AMEN

An excerpt from “This is Life” in *The Abundance* by Annie Dillard

What would you do differently, [if] you [could climb] up on your [own] beanstalk [and look] at scenes of all peoples at all times in all places?

When you climb down, would you dance any less to the music you love, knowing that music to be a provisional as a bug? Somebody has to make jogging shoes, to turn the soil, fish. If you descend the long rope ladders back to your people, your own time in the fabric, if you tell them what you have seen, and should someone care to listen, then what? Everyone knows times and cultures are plural.

If you [climb back up and] spend hours a day looking around... then what new wisdom might you take to your grave for worms to untangle?... Will you try to bring people up the [beanstalk]? The woman watching sheep over there, the man who carries embers in a pierced clay ball, the engineer, the girl who spins wool into yarn as she climbs, the smelter, the babies learning to recognize speech in their own languages, the man whipping a slave's flayed back, the woman digging roots—what would you tell them? And the future people—what are they doing? What excitements sweep people here and there from time to time? Into the muddy rivers they go, into the trenches, into the caves, into the mines, into the granary, into the sea in boats. Most humans who were ever alive lived inside a single culture that had not changed for hundreds of thousands of years.

Over here, the rains fail; they are starving. There, the caribou fail; they are starving. Corrupt leaders take the wealth. Not just there, but here. Rust and smut spoil the rye. When pigs and cattle starve or freeze, people die soon after. Disease empties a sector...

People look at the sky and at the other animals. They make beautiful objects, beautiful sounds, beautiful motions of their bodies beating drums in lines. They pray; they toss people in peat bogs; they help the sick and injured; they pierce their lips, their noses, ears; they make the same mistakes despite religion, written language, philosophy, and science. They build, they kill, they preserve, they count and figure, they boil the pot, they keep the embers alive; they tell their stories and gird themselves.

Say you have seen an ordinary bit of what is real [from your beanstalk], the infinite fabric of time that eternity shoots through, and time's soft-skinned people working and dying under slowly shifting stars. Then what?