

“Why We Do What We Do”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 4, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 10:38-42

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



Sermon: “Why We Do What We Do”

Over the years this passage has been used often as a comparison between two aspects of discipleship: doing and learning. Martha, it is said, represents the work of the disciple; caring for the ones Matthew 25 calls “the least of these,” serving the poor and doing the work of the church; the service to the Lord that is demanded of each of us. While Mary exemplifies the contemplative side; study, prayer, meditation, spirituality; listening for the still, soft voice of God.

Martha spends her time working for Jesus. Mary spends her time in relationship with Jesus. Or at least that’s how it’s often taught.

While I don’t completely disagree with that assessment, I also do not think Jesus here expresses a preference for one over the other. His words “Mary has chosen the better part,” are not a judgement of spirituality over service. That would be an odd thing to do given that in the passage immediately before this one, Jesus just told the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells this parable as an example of what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself which he describes in Matthew’s gospel as the greatest laws. Surely Jesus does not offer such an impassioned endorsement of sacrificial love and caring and then in the next instant, dismiss service as less important.

In the parable, a Samaritan stops to aid a wounded stranger. This is service. A Priest and a Levite pass by on their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. Their purpose was worship, a Spiritual act. If the greatest law is to love God and neighbor, and an example of that is the Good Samaritan doing and serving, *in direct contrast to a priest and a Levite on their way to worship*, why then would Jesus say that listening is more important than doing?

Well, he doesn’t. What he does say is that Martha has become “worried and distracted.” Martha is doing hospitality which is a good thing. This is her house to which Jesus comes. It is not only appropriate but expected that a host would provide food and drink to a guest and work to make him comfortable. Martha is doing what she is supposed to be doing.

But somewhere along the way, Martha has gotten so involved in the work of hospitality that she has forgotten why she is providing hospitality in the first place.

The purpose of hospitality is welcome; it is to make someone feel comfortable; to not only meet their bodily needs for food drink and rest, but to honor them acknowledge their importance as a child of God. It is to embody love and care for another.

I can just see Martha cutting and chopping, cleaning and dusting, setting the table and making everything perfect for her guest. She is a whirlwind of activity. All while finding time to criticize her sister for not doing the same. She speaks to Jesus, but only to plead with him to make Mary help. And in an ironic twist, by trying to honor her guest she has neglected her guest.

Jesus coming to see them is a good thing. It's a wonderful thing. But Martha is too busy meeting her perceived responsibilities to actually enjoy his presence. She is all about the *work of hosting* but has forgotten the importance of *being with* the person she is hosting.

Mary makes a different choice. She embraces her relationship with Jesus. I imagine she and Jesus spent some time catching up on their lives and sharing news of mutual friends they have seen since last they were together.

And then Mary sits at the feet of the master and listens. Here she learns about who God is and what God does. She learns about the grace and mercy and love of God and how God has blessed her. Here at Jesus' feet she learns about the Kingdom of God; that God's love and mercy are for her; that she has a place in God's Kingdom. Here at the master's feet she hears good news.

It's easy to get so focused on our business that we forget our purpose. The doctor is focused on the disease and forgets the needs of the patient. The teacher must teach the standards and loses track of the needs of the child. It happens to the best of us from time to time. But at Christmas, it probably happens to most of us.

Remember Christmas when you were a kid? It was the greatest day of the year. The whole season leading up to Christmas was filled with delicious anticipation. We would make our lists and count down the days until school let out. Some of y'all will remember the Sears Wish Book. When that came in the mail my sisters and I would fight over who got to look at it first. As a kid, Christmas was all about Santa and presents and Christmas Specials on TV. Christmas is a magical time when you're a kid.

But when you're a parent, sometimes things can get a little more chaotic. As the season approaches, so do the preparations. Christmas is no longer about the bountiful dreams of your youth. Now you're the one buying presents to fulfill other people's dreams. And not just for your children, but for co-workers and the mailman and that nice lady that delivers the newspaper every morning.

If there's family coming, then you've got probably got cleaning to do and maybe a guest room to make up. There are meals to plan and prepare and shopping to do. And if you're one of those families that hosts a Christmas party, well then there's that much more shopping and cleaning and preparing.

Then there are the decorations and the tree to decorate which means you've got to haul all of that stuff down from the attic or up from the basement. There are lights and greenery to hang. And as time runs short, nights can get longer, wrapping and putting together and baking and delivering. And if your job doesn't slow down around the holidays, you've got to do all of that while holding onto your gainful employment.

And on Christmas day, for some families, you've got to go visit everybody. Because you can't *not* see family on Christmas, right? One of my former students at Clemson was the child of divorced parents who had both re-married. Christmas day for her, was a sprint from one parent, to the other, to both sets of grandparents, and step-grands, all of whom had to be visited on or as close as possible to Christmas day. Christmas for her was more work than anything and had ceased to be joyful a long time ago.

In the midst of all the planning and preparation and traditions and celebrations; the things we want to do and the things we have to get done, it can be easy to forget why we were supposed to be celebrating in the first place. Baby who?

No matter what you're doing, if you don't stop once in a while to remind yourself of what is your purpose, then the thing you're doing stops meeting that purpose and becomes an end in itself. As disciples, we seek to love and serve God by loving and serving God's people. But we have to stop and refocus on Jesus or we run the risk of having our work become just that, another job to do, another commitment to keep, rather than what it should be: an expression of our love for God.

I was reading something by Cynthia Jarvis this week. She's a Presbyterian pastor in Philadelphia and I think she hit the nail right on the head.

"A Church that has been led to 'be worried and distracted by many things' inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shallows of frantic potlucks, anxious stewardship campaigns, and events designed to perpetuate the institution.

*Decisions will be made in meetings without a hint of God's reign. Food and drink will appear at table without Christ being recognized in the breaking of bread. Social issues may be addressed, but the gospel is missed in acts that partake of politics as usual."*¹

As Christians, everything we do, we do out of love and thanksgiving to God for God's goodness to us. We love and serve God by loving and serving God's children. But that's because God first loves and serves us. That's who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ.

But it can be very, very easy to develop a laser focus on what we are doing and completely lose track of *why* we are doing it. We do committees very well in the church. We hold meetings, produce agendas, take minutes, assign jobs, and do work and then the next month we meet again, and the cycle continues. But why are we doing it? Why do we serve meals at the YWCA Family Center Shelter? Why do we cut grass and do maintenance around the church? Why do we make immigrant bags and quilts and blankets? Why do we teach Sunday school and serve communion and allow ourselves to get nominated to be on a commission or ministry team? Why do we attend all those meetings and read all those minutes and do all that work?

Is it just to keep up our end? Is it just to make sure the church keeps going? So that we don't let this thing fall apart on our watch? Do we do it because of a sense of obligation? Or do we do it because we love God and want to serve God in every way that we can? We have to stop and refocus. There's a time for work, and a time to sit at the feet of the master and listen. And if you do the former and neglect the latter, you will eventually burn yourself out. You have to make time to be in relationship with God.

That means setting aside time to pray each day. Even ten minutes alone in a quiet space talking to God about what's on your heart makes a difference.

It can mean spending time reading the Bible. Or a devotional, or a book on discipleship by good Christian Authors like Shurlie Guthrie or Kathleen Norris or Barbara Brown Taylor.

It can be coming to worship and investing yourself in the *act* of worship. Not just listening to the music or the sermon as though they were performances to be appreciated. But allowing them to move through you so that the Holy Spirit can act upon your heart.

Maybe it means talking to God while you work or singing at the top of your lungs in your car. Some of my best conversations with God take place while I'm driving. And some of the moments I am most aware of God's presence and God's grace is when I'm moved by the power of music. And that's not particularly church music, (if it feeds your soul, it's good), but for me it's the Beatles, and Bowling for Soup and Taylor Swift. Laugh if you want, but when I hear *Shake It Off*, it feels like a straight word from God on the power of letting go. But it has to be intentional. And it has to be God-centered.

My father always told me that your life is like a cup. God fills it up with the intention that you will drink from it and also pour it out for others. You give energy and help and support and love and attention. But pretty soon that cup starts getting empty. And so you have to go back to God every day, so that God can fill your cup again. If you don't your cup goes dry, and then not only is there nothing for others, there not even anything for you.

We love and serve God by loving and serving God's people. But we have to make time to sit at the feet of the master and listen. Here we learn about who God is and what God does. We learn about the grace and mercy and love of God and how God has blessed us. Here at Jesus' feet we learn about the Kingdom of God; that God's love and mercy are for us; that we have a place in God's Kingdom. Here at the master's feet we hear good news.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Jarvis, Cynthia A. "Luke 10:38-42, Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 264. Print.