

Sermon 051715 Mary and Martha
Scripture- Luke 10: 38-42
Sermon Title- Don't Just Do Something; Sit There

I am deeply worried about our country. The events touched off in Ferguson, MO and continued events since, have escalated into rioting in the streets of our cities. Slavery has often been called the original sin of America. Even though we've come so far in terms of emancipation, civil rights, and opportunity, we still appear to live under slavery's curse. Mistrust and hatred and violence between the races are still the order of the day. Changes in the law don't necessarily change people's attitudes. This of course still exists on both sides of the races.

Our political system appears also to be in disarray. Politicians refuse to work together to solve our nation's problems. Axes are ground and accusations hurled rather than try to improve education, immigration, infrastructure, security, defense, and on and on.

One of the hallmarks of functioning democracy is for the people involved, politicians and non-politians alike, is that people have shared values. If the parties have shared values and are willing to talk with one another, work with one another, to be willing to disagree without being disagreeable, problems can be solved.

At this time in America, we seem to have lost our shared values. This is not completely true; of course, there are plenty of people with shared values. But the scales seem to be tipped to the side of people's attitudes clashing over conducting constructive dialog. I pray for the day that shared values in this country are the order of the day.

Today's gospel story is a classic depiction of a clash in attitudes, or approaches in life. Mary and Martha could not be more different in their approach to what appears to be an unexpected visit from Jesus. Martha busies herself with preparing a meal for Jesus while Mary just sits herself at his feet. Martha gets annoyed with Mary because she'd like some help. Jesus gives Martha a gentle rebuke saying that Mary is doing the right thing.

Now, let me say that from what I can tell there are many, many more Marthas around than Marys. Churches couldn't exist without Marthas. Who will do the coffee hour? Martha. Who will do the cleaning up? Martha. Who will see that childcare is provided? Martha. Who will handle the flowers? Martha. Who will provide the spectacular potlucks? All the Marthas. By this definition, a Martha of this world is a bright-eyed, practical minded person who is intent upon doing the right and good thing at the right and good time and in the right and good way. This is someone who is concerned and informed. You know this includes

you men. Yes, by this definition you are Marthas, too. These might be risky words for me to say but I stand by them. You get to work on time, you work to the best of your abilities, you do the upkeep around the house, you vote, and you contribute here in so many ways. You may not be concerned with placing good meals on the tables of unexpected guests but you are distracted by the need to hold up your end in this life. You take pride in being earnest and hard working.

We are Americans. We are the most productive society on earth. If there is work to do we get it done. Period. We are a society of doers, of Marthas. Hand in hand with our inherent busyness is our chronic fatigue. We work hard and then lecture each other on how hard we work and how tired we are. Our hard work and fatigue might be the most interesting thing about us.

I had the chance to get a lesson in the American pace of life a number of years ago while traveling in the Italian countryside. We stopped for lunch at what can best be described as a booth with a few stools and a picnic table next to it. There were two of us and we both ordered the same thing, a ham sandwich. Now the ham, called prosciutto ham, is dried so should be sliced very thin. Well, this little old man in the booth started slicing this ham so thin, so carefully, even lovingly...but painfully slow for American business people stopping for lunch. My impulse was to start

yelling things like, “I’m hoping to have this sandwich today, buddy! Could you step it up a bit?” Only probably with some ungodly words in there.

Then, it hit me. I’m not at work. I’m not even in the United States. Maybe I should let this experience happen at the speed that it happens. Maybe I’m on vacation and should relax and take the world as it is. Well, about a half hour later I enjoyed the finest sandwich I’ve ever eaten. Maybe it was the ham and maybe it was how slowly I ate it. That little man in the booth taught me a lesson that day. But, of course, I wasn’t back to work a week and I was back to express lunch gulped down like I was afraid someone would steal it.

My small moment of illumination in Parma, Italy gives me a window on the struggles of Martha. God had come to visit her and she wanted to run around doing stuff for him. Martha loved Jesus but could only love him on her terms. Isn’t that what we do? We express our love by doing things for others. That is another struggle of us Marthas of the world; it is very difficult to be receivers. It is said that it is more blessed to give than receive but it is definitely more difficult to receive than to give. The Marthas of the world are doing the necessary things, so occupied in the giving we do not have time to realize how frequently we are in times of need. Now, it is important to remember that Jesus never

says or implies, nor am I for that matter, that there is anything wrong with hard work or good hospitality. What he is teaching us is to reorder our priorities.

This is where Mary becomes key to his message. Mary knows that when God enters your life, no worldly task is more important. Mary simply sits at the feet of Jesus and makes herself available, intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When Jesus comes into our lives he reminds us that we need the grace and peace he has to offer. That can only happen when we make ourselves available. We need to be able to stop what we are doing and allow God into our lives.

This is a story about how we can love God. Remember, the Greatest Commandment: Love God with your whole heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. Being Marthas is worthy work but it is exhausting. Let's try being Marys for a while and sit at God's feet and let God fill us with what we need the most...God's love and God's grace.

This is also a prayer for America. May we as a nation sit for a time of peace and reflection. Maybe when we get up we might find a way to find shared values.

You know that little exercise I do to start worship? You know, the deep breath, the relaxation, the centering exercise. That's what I'm up to. Let's let go for a while and let God in.

From this story we learn when Jesus comes into our lives things aren't what they used to be, and neither should we. AMEN