

The Church In Action: Listen and Learn

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Luke 10:38-42

Like last week's sermon about the "Good Samaritan," we have another familiar story on which many sermons have been preached, the story of Martha and Mary.

READ Luke 10:38-42

In this short little story here, we have these two sisters in a house that Jesus visited. Jesus was there to teach and Martha was concerned about all of her many tasks. These could have been household tasks of cooking and hosting, or any variety of other chores around the house.

Mary, on the other hand, sat at Jesus' feet to listen to him. This seemed to have made Martha upset. (Does anyone hear sibling rivalry here?) So she addressed Jesus about it asking him to send Mary over to help with all of the tasks. Jesus said "No," and indicated that Mary had chosen a better option.

As so many stories, this one is so easy to interpret through our western-trained eyes and American culture. From our perspective, we read that Martha was distracted by all of the busy-body work while Mary simply wanted to listen to Jesus.

You can hear the tension for Martha. Her sister, Mary, isn't being responsible with her share of the household chores and is sticking Martha with the whole load! Mary doesn't seem to care and Martha is upset! Who wouldn't be!

This can easily be a sermon about getting our priorities in line. It is a reminder to put Jesus first in our daily lives, like Mary, while not being distracted by less important things.

This is a helpful reminder and a good practice that will yield great results when taken to heart!

However, there is much more going on here that relates to the Middle Eastern culture of Jesus' day.

Martha's concern wasn't primarily about the workload in the kitchen that Mary was neglecting. More likely was that her comment drew attention to the idea that Mary was being rebellious and crossing a culturally understood line risking

embarrassment for the whole household.

In those days, women and men had their places in family life and in society. There were strict lines and roles that they simply didn't cross.

One example is that houses were divided into spaces for men and other spaces for women.

The place where Jesus sat down to teach was the public room of the house, a space where only men would sit and talk. Other areas of the house including the kitchen and areas unseen by visitors were spaces for women.

Mary had crossed a very important line by cozying herself up with the men in the public meeting space, and this was scandalous!

Martha's comments are justified from within that culture. Others in the room may have been thinking the same things: Mary should not be out there with the men. Is she shameless? She needs to go back to her appropriate place with the other women!

Secondly, she had crossed a social and religious line by sitting down at Jesus' feet to listen to him.

We might think of sitting at someone's feet like the adoration a

fans gives to a rock star — sitting there admiring the greatness of the one up on the stage.

As a teenager back in the 1980s, I went with several friends to see Amy Grant at Cobo Hall. This was when she had a bunch of hits that scaled the charts. She was the hottest thing around. Somehow, we were able to get second row seats! But we didn't stay in those seats for long. As soon as Amy Grant took the stage, we all rushed forward to hang on the edge of the stage, where we stayed for the rest of the concert.

Oh, and did I mention that we stopped on the way to the concert that night to buy roses for Amy? So, while I was there hanging on the edge of the stage looking up at this rock star I admired, I reached up and handed her a white rose. It was the best!

In Jesus' day, sitting at the feet of a rabbi was not in any way like it was for me looking up admiring Amy Grant.

No, sitting at the feet of a rabbi was first of all a place reserved only for men. But not only that — it was reserved for men who wanted to be a student of and learn to become like that rabbi, as a rabbi themselves.

What Mary was doing was declaring that she wanted to learn from Jesus, the master, and become a teacher and preacher, like Jesus. She wanted to work alongside Jesus proclaiming with both knowledge and wisdom, the good news of God's boundary-breaking love that was at loose in the world.

Knowing this bold and brave culture-breaking move by Mary makes Jesus' response to Martha even more powerful.

"Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Jesus affirmed that Mary belonged among the disciples, equal to the men who were called as disciples.

In the Baptist tradition, we say that every person who is part of the church is a minister. It doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman, if you are black or white, if you are Columbian or Russian or Native American, you are part of God's mission.

Mary, in her culture, was told that she could not, in fact did not have a voice. There was no place for her to share God's good news. It was not her role. That job was reserved for other people.

...and yet, in her heart she knew she was called to more.

This is not so much about the women's rights movement, but about removing the barriers that allow people who have been called to actually take action and get to work building God's realm here in this world.

Some of you here today, may think that God's work is to be done by those who are professionally trained and have a degree in theology. Perhaps you think that God has not called you, but has called other people who can speak better, are more outgoing, or who have more or better skills than you.

It can be normal to doubt your abilities, to question your role in God's plan ... and yet when you look deeper into your heart, you know that there is more that you are called to do. The only thing is that you are afraid to accept it, or to speak it out loud.

If you are going to live into this life of doing God's work, it does not mean that you need to be professionally trained in seminary, although some of you might be called on that journey.

Instead, being a minister means that we listen and learn from God

and each other. This is both reading and reflecting on scripture, as well as getting involved in doing ministry and listening to how God leads.

For example, the Beer and Bible Study group about a month ago took action. First they **listened** to what God had put on their hearts. God was nudging them to reach out to the community and offer something of value.

So they created a spaghetti dinner, held this past Friday. It was an opportunity for people to connect here at the church who might not otherwise be connected, like parents who bring their kids to Gateway, and others who park in the lot behind us. Maybe they'd grab a bite to eat before heading out to hang in the city for the evening.

We posted and shared info on Facebook, put out signs, and encouraged the congregation to invite friends.

By the numbers, it was a smashing success. The event brought in about 50 people and raised \$665 for Judson Center along with all of the leftover unopened food that was donated. What an amazing thing to celebrate!

The Beer and Bible Study group also **learned** a few things after this first run at this kind of event.

They learned that we are not very good yet at connecting with people through social media, because it didn't attract anyone to the event. Neither did any of the signage and advertising.

They learned that it is an established relationship and personal invitation that has people show up.

This is a huge piece of learning as we plan the next events and work to grow our congregation. We cannot rely on advertising to do the work for us. We have to take action to talk with and invite people. This is what makes a difference.

I invite you all to take a seat at the feet of Jesus, our rabbi, and learn better how to share the love and grace of God, and be part of the new thing God is doing here in Birmingham.