

“Faith and Works” – Lk 10:38-42 – July 21/13

How many of you who were here last week remember what the Gospel text was? Or the topic of the sermon? Hands up – yes, it’s ok to raise your hands in a Presbyterian worship service! Hmmm. Ok. For the rest of you, and for those of you who weren’t here, last week’s text was the incident immediately preceding this one, and it was about the Good Samaritan – remember the Nike commercial: “Just do it!”? Keep that in the back of your mind as we look at today’s incident between Jesus and Martha.

Jesus and Martha? I know, you probably think this text is about Mary and Martha – that’s how most people remember it. But be careful - this is one of those problematic little texts from scripture. It’s well known or at least known about, the story seems pretty simple, and almost everybody thinks they not only remember it but understand it. After all, isn’t this the incident where Jesus tells Martha to stop complaining, and get back into the kitchen? Well, yes, sort of – and that’s just one of the problems with this encounter between Jesus and the two sisters – but there are more problems as well. I suggest that we need to take a step back from what we think we know about this encounter, and try to look at it with fresh eyes.

Let’s review the details. “As they went on their way”, the story opens. Not quite “once upon a time” but close, although with a much narrower perspective on when it happened. That’s the first of the little problematic issues – while Luke places this incident at Martha’s house in Galilee it bears more than a passing resemblance to a similar incident in John’s gospel; however John claims the house was in Bethany. Keep this detail in mind along with last week’s text and we’ll get back to it in a few minutes.

Next, “He [meaning Jesus, presumably along with his disciples] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.” “Yeah”, you’re saying. “Un-huh. Into Martha’s home.” Did you not feel the earth move when we read that? Did you not sense a ripple in the force? There are two HUGE details in that sentence that should have every one of us perking up in the pews, shaking our heads at the strangeness of this, and holding our breath to hear what could possibly come next. It doesn’t have quite the same impact in the year 2013 in Vancouver but first of all, the house was owned by Martha! This was her house! Unusual, startling even. The laws of inheritance made it almost impossible that she would have received the house in a will – she must have bought it, which was challenging enough to be rare. That gives us an early clue to Martha’s industriousness. But, as if Martha owning the house wasn’t shocking enough, Jesus enters the house. For Jesus to even be in a house with a woman (unless she were a slave) was shocking enough, but given the Levitical rules of religious purity for him to enter a house owned by a woman was unthinkable.

And the problems get deeper; not only was Jesus in a house owned by a woman, she was preparing the food he would eat! Shocking! How could he not know that this would prevent him from entering a synagogue or especially the temple?

And if all this isn’t enough to have you holding your breath or shaking your head in disbelief, there’s more – much more. Seated at Jesus’ feet, listening with rapt attention, is none other than Martha’s sister Mary. At his feet, just like any student of this rabbi – what nerve, what chutzpah! How dare she?! And of course those were the very questions Martha was muttering under her breath, until it all came to a boil, and she couldn’t help trying to recruit Jesus – “Lord, make her help me”. It’s interesting to see how Jesus responded to Martha’s attempt to triangulate him into the conflict between herself and Mary. Most ministers, at least those with any scar tissue at all, are very sensitive to being ‘triangulated’ (dragged into a conflict to take one side against the other). There are three possible responses to such an attempt: the ‘good’, the ‘bad’, and the ‘ugly’. The ‘good’ is to respond by asking

about the conflict – you know, “Martha, why are you feeling this way towards Mary?” and exploring the answer. The ‘bad’ is to agree to take the side of the recruiter – “Mary, you should go help Martha”. The ‘ugly’ was the choice Jesus took, namely to take the side of the ‘other’ instead of the recruiter, to rebuke Martha and to praise Mary. It’s not too surprising that we don’t hear Martha’s response – it probably wasn’t fit to print in a family bible!

On the surface, the meaning of this incident seems fairly simple, doesn’t it? We can take Jesus’ response about “only one thing is necessary” as a declaration that we don’t live by bread alone, but by the word of God. We can hear Jesus’ praise of Mary as being an endorsement of a faith that is characterized by dreamy spirituality, sitting at the feet of Jesus, tasting every word that comes forth from his lips as sweet manna, wrapped in a comfortable closeness with Jesus that gives us an experience like none other has ever known. “Mary has chosen the better part”, we hear Jesus say, and we can rejoice that it can never be taken away from her, or from us.

We can, and many of us do. Huge segments of the church today practice their faith exactly as Mary did, sitting dreamily at Jesus’ feet, absorbed and swallowed up in the heightened spirituality of the moment, insulated from or at least ignoring the tasks in the next room of feeding the hungry, washing the dishes, making the beds. The conflict so clear between Martha and Mary still spills out from the church today, with arguments and disagreements and conflict and even open hostility between those who see the foundation of exercising faith being spiritual and those who see it as being practical. The Martha’s busy cleaning the sanctuary and putting on the church supper wonder why the Mary’s can’t come out of bible study to lend a hand, and the Mary’s look down their noses at the lack of spirituality of the Martha’s who are too busy to join in bible study and prayer groups.

If we take this incident in Martha’s house by itself, and listen to Jesus’ response that rebukes Martha and praises Mary, we would be making a mistake, the mistake of letting ourselves be triangulated into the conflict. If we were to take the same position, and take Mary’s side, we would soon be without any Martha’s, and that would not be a good thing!

I’m pretty sure that Luke understood this dynamic. Do you recall what I asked you to keep in mind when I started this sermon? I mentioned two things to remember: the significant difference between Luke’s account and John’s, and the incident that immediately precedes this one in Luke’s gospel. Where John identifies Martha’s house as being in Bethany, Luke makes the location a bit anonymous (“a certain village”) but still notes it as a particular or ‘certain’ village. By using the word ‘certain’, Luke triggers us (well, me at least, and I’m sure his first readers also) into asking “what village?”, and they would probably clue in that he has relocated the story, not just in distance but also in time. This of course is not the only instance of Luke doing this very thing, and he does it most often to place the story next to another for contrast or comparison.

And what was the ‘other’ story? The incident with the lawyer and the parable of the Good Samaritan. You may recall from last week that that incident was used by Jesus to address the question of “how can I inherit eternal life?”, answering it with a definition that was distinctly Martha-like, using the parable of the Samaritan to point out that the kind of faith needed was a faith of helping, of action, of business, of working hard and sacrificing self. It would be easy to come away from the Good Samaritan incident rebuking Mary and praising Martha, and Luke understood that that would not be appropriate either.

And so, immediately following the Good Samaritan answer to the question of “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” we have this incident between Martha and Jesus about Mary. The two incidents give us two opposing views of an answer to that most foundational question of faith. The full answer to the “works or faith” question and conflict is ‘both-and’. We are sustained both by the bread that we bake and by the bread of life broken for us by Christ. We are called to live out our faith both in study

and in service, on our knees in rapt devotion and on our knees scrubbing the floor. However, the faith to which we are called is not one of polarized extremes, but an ongoing balancing act, juggling the tasks of spiritual exercises and worldly exercises. “Love the Lord your God with all that you are; also love your neighbour.” That was the answer to the question posed, and we are called to do both.

But before we leave this incident between Jesus, Martha and Mary, there is one more aspect of the story that we must note, as it demonstrates another of Luke’s balancing acts in presenting the story of the grace of God in Jesus, and that is the gender balance. The characters in the incident that asked and partially answered the question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”, the story of the lawyer and the parable of the Good Samaritan, were all men. Jesus, the lawyer, the man beaten and left for dead, the priest, the lawyer, the Samaritan, all male figures. Luke has a particular interest in showing that Jesus, as shocking and radical as it was for his day, brings that same eternal life to women as well. The implication is clear: Mary is as welcome at Jesus’ feet as Marvin is in the kitchen. Luke is concerned that we understand that in Christ the distinctions between us are gone. As Paul puts it, “<Gal 3:28> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, Samaritan or Martha or Mary, we are all one in Christ. It is not a question of “either-or”, it is a question of ‘both-and’, a balancing act between our love of God and our love of neighbour that frames and defines the faith to which we are called by God, and to the life eternal given to us through Christ our Lord. May God grant us the wisdom to see, and the strength to live out our faith with balance and love, to His glory and for the sake of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.