SIT AND LISTEN

Luke 10:38-42

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Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

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 Two women, Martha and Mary, are sitting on the front porch of their retirement home, enjoying a fine summer evening in their rocking chairs. Martha is doing a crossword puzzle, planning the next day’s meals, talking on her cell phone, and listening to the crickets chirping in the front yard. Mary is just sitting there, enjoying the sound of the choir practicing in the church across the yard. Mary says to Martha: “Isn’t that heavenly music?” And Martha responds: “Yes, and I understand they do it by rubbing their legs together.”

 In this complex, multi-tasking, frantically-paced society in which we live, it is easy for one to be so distracted by doing many things, that one has a rather difficult time listening to one thing – even when that one thing is the words of someone close to us.

 And the one closest to us is God – because God, the kingdom of God, the resurrected Christ, the Spirit of God, dwells in us. We are close to other people, to be sure. We are interconnected with all of creation. But we are closest to God. And listening to God is a very good thing to do. Listening to God is “the better part” of life in the kingdom of God – as Jesus says of Mary, who chooses that “better part” in our story for today from Luke.

 Listening to God – which is to say, mindfulness of the real presence of God with and within us all – is the better part of life for us also. This is my theme for today in this little sermon – mindfulness of the real presence of God. I encourage us all to spend some time to just “sit and listen” as we go about our busy lives doing this and that – and very often doing both “this and that” at the same time.

 I believe Jesus is encouraging us to sit and listen through our story for today about Martha and Mary in the gospel of Luke. “Martha, Martha,” says Jesus, “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” This “better part” is the practice of Mary, who “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.”

 There’s nothing wrong with “doing,” of course. In fact, most of the time we are “doing” something. It’s not the “doing” that’s the problem. One can “do” all kinds of things and still remain mindful of the kingdom of God – which we are doing when we are mindful of each present moment of “doing” – doing only one thing at a time, that is. Multi-tasking, which seems to be valued so highly in our contemporary society, gets in the way of mindfulness of each present moment. It’s not the ”doing” that prevents us from practicing mindfulness – it’s the doing too many things at once that keep us distracted and forgetful of the better part – the present moment in which the kingdom of God dwells – the present moment in which we can become aware of the reality of the Spirit of God in us – the present moment in which the life and teaching of Jesus comes alive in our life – like the teaching for today to just “sit and listen.”

 Jesus has other teaching, of course. For example, the story that immediately precedes ours for today is the well-known story about the Good Samaritan, about which David preached last week. And in that story, Jesus teaches to be “doers,” not only “sit-and-listeners.”

 The Samaritan is one who is the “doer” – he “does” love for his neighbor. And Jesus teaches those with ears to hear, “Go and do likewise.” The priest and Levite in the parable are not “bad guys.” They are just stuck in their religious rules, preventing them from being good neighbors to the wounded man. But Jesus teaches, “Go and do” – without discrimination and in spite of particular religious rules.

 So, I think the Good Samaritan story is a good companion piece for today’s Martha and Mary story. That is, sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to what he says is one way of demonstrating “love of God;” while going and doing what Jesus says is one way of demonstrating “love of neighbor. Taken together, I think that Mary and the Good Samaritan exemplify the Great Commandment – the quintessential commandment in the New Testament – as well as in the Old Testament, for that matter.

 So, what are we supposed to do – go and do – or sit and listen? The answer is Yes! Both are expressions of the commandment to love, that undergirds and overrides all commandments and laws and rules in the Bible and in the church. Both Mary and the Samaritan are following the great commandment – each in their own way.

 So, what about Martha? Well, for one thing, Martha is kind of like the priest and the Levite in the Good Samaritan story, in that she is stuck in the rules and social codes of her society – so she would never think of sitting at the feet of Jesus, for example. In the historical context of this story, it is only men who sit at the feet of teachers; it is only men – at first, that is – who are disciples. Women are supposed to be in the kitchen, doing the work, and waiting on the men. Unfortunately, that is still the case in some contemporary contexts as well.

 But Jesus breaks the mold of society’s rules regarding women – in this story, as well as throughout his ministry and teaching. In this story, Jesus demonstrates that it is proper, indeed, for a woman to leave her stereotypical role in society and take up the role of a faithful disciple – who sits at his feet and listens. It’s analogous to the way in which Jesus demonstrates that it is proper, indeed, for the Samaritan to take the role of a faithful disciple. Both Mary and the Samaritan are following the Great Commandment. Mary loves God – and she sits and listens. The Samaritan loves his neighbor – and he acts for the sake of his neighbor. Both are important. Both Mary and the Samaritan are model disciples.

 Now, this is not to say that Martha is not a faithful disciple. This story is not a “put down” of Martha. There is nothing wrong with her “doing” many tasks. Martha, in fact, is the one who welcomes Jesus into her home in the first place. And, in fact, doing tasks like household chores and cooking can be a wonderful way to connect to the real presence of God – because we connect to the real presence of God by being mindful of the present moment – mindful of the present moment of doing a particular household task, for example.

The only problem with Martha in the story is that she is worried and distracted about many things – she is multi-tasking – and such distraction is getting in the way of her awareness of the present kingdom of God that is sitting right there in the living room, in the person of Jesus. And – in this story – sitting and listening to this person Jesus is the better part. It is through such sitting and listening that one can awaken to the reality of the kingdom of God that exists in the present moment – with and within each one of us.

One of my favorite spiritual writers is Richard Rohr. In fact, I read his writings every day on a daily email from a community he founded called the Center for Action and Contemplation. As the name indicates, his focus is upon the practice of contemplation – coupled with the taking of positive action that arises out of the strength and inspiration that one receives when one practices contemplation. And one practices contemplation by practicing mindfulness of the present moment and awakening to the real presence of God. This is one of the many ways in which Richard Rohr describes this practice:

“God-in-us is the riverbed of mercy that underlies all the flotsam and jetsam that flows over it and soon passes away. Vast, silent, restful, and resourceful, it receives and also releases all these comings and goings. It is awareness itself (as opposed to judgment) and awareness is not the same as “thinking.” It refuses to be pulled into emotional and mental tugs-of-war that form most of human life. To look out from this untouchable silence is what we mean by contemplation.”

Another of my favorite spiritual writers is Cynthia Bourgeault, who has written extensively about a particular Christian form of contemplation, known as “centering prayer.” In her book, “The Heart of Centering Prayer,” she talks about centering prayer as the same kind of contemplation about which Richard Rohr writes. I have talked about centering prayer before from this pulpit. Cynthia Bourgeault writes this: “Basically, the method of Centering Prayer consists in learning to withdraw attention from our thoughts – those incessant creations of our busy minds – in order to rest in a gentle, open attentiveness to divine reality itself. This gentle releasing of thoughts is known in Centering Prayer teaching as ‘consenting to the presence and action of God.’ It is not hard to do, but it’s hard – at first – to value.”

So, contemplation – this is what Mary practices in our story for today, as she sits and listens to Jesus. And I do encourage the practice for everyone. And mindfulness of the present moment is the key to practicing contemplation – whether one is practicing Centering Prayer – or practicing deep listening without thinking of anything other than listening to whomever is speaking – or practicing mindfulness of whatever one is doing at the moment, without thinking of doing other things. Contemplation – mindfulness – is the key to awakening to “God-in-us,” as Richard Rohr puts it. Practicing mindfulness is a way to find and experience the kingdom of God.

Of course, practicing mindfulness is easier for some than others – just as it is apparently easier for Mary than Martha in our story. But anyone can do it – Marthas or Marys – Levites or Samaritans – extroverts or introverts. Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is going on in the present moment. Mindfulness is a practice of the mind, in which one stops thinking about the past and the future – which are distractions – and intentionally focuses upon the present – whether one is washing dishes, or one is just sitting and listening.

So – sit and listen. This is the focus of our story for today. And this is the point of the story for us as we live in our complex, multi-tasking, frantically-paced society. We Christians are called to both contemplation and action. But today, I especially encourage contemplation – and the practice of mindfulness in both contemplation and action.

Sit and listen – you will find God – here and now – that is the “better part” – and that part will make all the difference in your life as a disciple.

Let us pray: God of Presence: Enable us to be still and know that you are God; inspire us to then take action based upon the teaching and example of your Son, strengthened by the power of your Spirit within. AMEN.