

“Sit There” GPPC 7-21-19
Amos 8:1-12, Luke 10:38-42

When he was in Greensboro last fall, Dr. Brian Blount, President of Union Presbyterian Seminary, not only preached here at Guilford Park but also delivered a lecture at our sister congregation, Westminster Presbyterian. In that lecture, President Blount used an image for understanding how the content of the gospels was assembled.

He said some of us remember back in the old days when we had Polaroid Cameras. Some of you remember those, right? You took a picture and the camera made this noise (whirring sound) and out popped a photograph. And maybe you waved it or blew on it to make it develop faster. And it developed right before your eyes—like magic. And then eventually you might’ve put the photograph into a shoebox with other photographs and stuck it up in the attic of your house. A memory put into a box with other memories, eventually to be sorted into a family story.

Dr. Blount said that’s similar to how the content of the gospels was assembled. Each gospel writer had access to various stories about Jesus,

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like photos in a shoebox in the attic. And each writer selected stories from those boxes, and placed the stories in a particular order. But the order was not merely chronological. “On July 22, in the year 30 A.D. ...” No. Each writer put the stories in a particular order to say something theological. The stories were placed in such an order to help us understand what it means to follow the God we see revealed in Jesus Christ.

That’s what Luke did too. So the order of material in his gospel matters. If you were in worship last Sunday you may remember we read Luke 10:25-37. Do you remember what the story was? The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

What does Luke put right beside The Parable of the Good Samaritan? The story of Martha and Mary, and there’s a reason the two stories are beside each other.

Luke says Jesus and his disciples entered an unnamed village. And there they were welcomed into Martha’s home. As you may remember, there were clear expectations for welcome, hospitality in that time and culture.

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Many years ago, I recall visiting dear friends of Beth's and mine. The husband was a Presbyterian pastor colleague and his wife was a CEO for a local nonprofit organization. I'd performed the couple's wedding. We were long-time friends. I pulled up at their house, stood on their front porch, rang the doorbell, and heard their little dog barking. The couple opened the door, welcomed me in, and their little dog came over and threw up on my shoe. The couple apologized. We laughed and the wife said, "Well, at least it didn't happen to somebody important."

Hospitality was carefully prescribed in Jesus' day, as one scholar puts it "an intricately choreographed dance." (Bruce J. Malina in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 408.) A host was expected to provide things such as food and drink and maybe a foot-washing. And there was a courtesy protocol for how people spoke to each other. Guests were treated, indeed, as important.

So it's surprising to read what happened at Martha's house. Martha's sister, Mary, "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying," while Martha took care of the hospitality tasks.

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But Luke says Martha was “distracted by her many tasks.” And she did something clearly outside the protocol. She actually complained to her guest. “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”

Notice not only did Martha “break the rules” by complaining about her sister *and* her guest, she also did something else. She tried to manipulate Jesus into making Mary do what Martha wanted.

And here is something you Bible students out there may have noticed. Never once in all four gospels does Jesus allow someone to come to him to complain about somebody else and then manipulate Jesus into trying to change the behavior of that other person. In counseling lingo, Jesus always refuses to be “triangled.” Are you unhappy with someone in a relationship? Jesus will make you deal with that person face to face yourself. He will not be used as a petty go-between to make it easier for you. You have to do your own work.

So Jesus avoided Martha’s trap. And he said to her, “Martha, Martha, you’re worried and distracted by many things; there’s need of

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only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

“Martha, Martha...” Some scholars think Jesus repeated her name as a gentle scolding. But at least one scholar says Jesus said her name twice as a form of affection. “Martha, Martha...” (François Bovon, *Luke 2*, Hermeneia Series, 72.)

Affection or not, what Jesus said seems unfair, doesn't it? After all, Martha was welcoming her guest, practicing hospitality, just as was expected. Meanwhile, her sister, Mary, wasn't lifting a finger to help. And Jesus refused to intercede to get Mary to work. It seems unjust.

But look a little closer. First, Jesus did not fuss about Martha's hospitality. Instead, he raised concerns that she was “worried and distracted by many things.” The Greek words mean to be anxious and troubled, pulled in many directions. Jesus did not fuss about Martha's hospitality, but he was concerned about her anxiety and her being *troubled* about welcome, rather than being glad about welcome.

Maybe there's a lesson for the church here. We want to be as welcoming of others to our community of faith as we can, but we do not

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want to become anxious or troubled about it. Visitors often like to be welcomed, but not hounded. We welcome best when we welcome with gladness and light, not toil and desperation.

Second, Jesus once again reminded us of his revolutionary ways by how he responded to Mary. Some biblical scholars believe rabbis of the time “did not allow women to ‘sit at their feet,’ that is, to be disciples.” (Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, 152.) One Bible expert says, “Judaism allowed and even required faith and religious obedience on the part of women. But did it permit them to study with the teachers of the law?... [This] must...have been the exception rather than the rule. Jesus must have shocked his fellow Jews by the way he welcomed women into the inner circle of his disciples.” (Bovon, 70-71.)

Jesus treated Mary as someone in his inner circle of disciples. And though he did not denigrate Martha’s activity of serving, Jesus made it clear that “there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part...”

The one needful thing, the better part, of course, is to listen to the word of the Lord. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus not for a little children’s

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sermon, not for a dumbed down version of the gospel, not for a “Well, men have their proper roles, and you women have your proper roles.”

No. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus as someone listening, learning, and preparing in the inner circle of disciples, in other words, a leader.

Now we’ve all heard the expression, “Don’t just sit there, do something.” Well, I used to see a spiritual director who helped me by listening to what was happening in my life and by praying with and for me and by recommending spiritual practices. I loved the title of one book he suggested, a book by a Buddhist psychotherapist, it’s called *Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There*. As the author, Sylvia Boorstein explains, “It’s about thinking and then doing.”

And now we’re reminded of why Luke placed this story where it is in his gospel. Last Sunday he told us that living faith requires the *action* of caring for people in need. This Sunday he tells us that faith also requires *listening* and *reflecting* upon “the word of the Lord” to us, and *then* doing something about it. Action alone isn’t enough. Reflection alone isn’t enough either. As Christians we need balance in our lives.

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So consider your own life right now. Do you have a time when you seriously study “the word of the Lord”? Do you have a good resource that helps you understand the Bible and how it speaks to your life and the life of the world? Do you have a Sunday school class or a book study, or at least time in worship to learn from the sermon? “There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.” Have you too?

“Don’t just do something, sit there.”

It’s remarkable that the scholars who assembled the lectionary readings for each Sunday of the liturgical year, also chose Amos 8:1-12 to pair with Luke today. Speaking through the prophet, God says, “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will...practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals...’ Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.”

What’s going on? The wealthy and the people in power are abusing the poor. The rich and powerful can’t wait for the holy days to

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be over so that they can get back to cheating and mistreating the poor.

But God has a special place in God's heart for the poor.

And God is enraged by all bullies who abuse the weak and the poor and who use worship and false piety as a cover. God says to the bullies, "You can't wait for worship time to be over so you can get back to your oppression of the poor and weak. Well, I have news for you. Your feast times are going to be turned into times of mourning, and your happy songs into songs of lamentation, and your Sunday duds into sackcloth."

This is what God promises for the wealthy and powerful who mistreat the weak and poor.

Those who use their power to abuse girls in their mansions, who use their power to make racist statements, who use their power to lie with seeming impunity, who use their power to destroy the environment, should be aware that God is enraged. God is a forgiving God, but God is also a just God. Whether you sit in a detention center, or a shack, or a middle-class home, or if you sit in the White House; God is a just God, and justice is coming.

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But speaking through the Prophet Amos, God also warns of a famine, a famine we are seeing today. God says, “The time’s coming when I will send a famine not of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.”

That’s what we are facing today. In many parts of our country and in parts of the church, a famine of hearing the words of the Lord, ignoring God’s call for Christians to be faithful in our lives, disregarding basic decency, reveling in shouting insults and lies, picking on the weakest people. One professor says, “Amos does not shrink from naming names, from citing specific instances of injustice and inequality. If the preacher is squeamish about making such ‘political’ or ‘economic’ statements in a sermon, then the preacher ought to cite Amos as the preacher’s model...One way you can tell the difference between a true and living God and a dead and fake god is that a false god will never tell you anything that will make you angry and uncomfortable!” (William H. Willimon in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, 248.)

What’s needed is for bullies to repent of their bullying. What’s needed for *all of us* is time for serious reflection upon the word of the

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Lord, especially the parts that make us uncomfortable and angry. There is one thing needed. Choose the better part. Don't just do something; sit there. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal