

James 1:22-25

Luke 10:38-42

November 16, 2014

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, North Carolina

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus
TAKE TIME TO SHARPEN YOUR SAW

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain small town, where a man named Martin welcomed him into his shop. He had a brother named Harry, who sat in one of the chairs gathered around the Mr. Coffee and listened to what Jesus was saying. But Martin was distracted by his many tasks as he worked on an SUV. So he came over to Jesus, wiping his greasy hands on a rag, and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my brother has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell him to help me.” But the Lord answered him, “Martin, Martin, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Harry has discovered it and chosen it, and it will not be taken away from him.”¹

OK, now that we’ve established that this story about Jesus is not just for or about Presbyterian Women working in the kitchen or having Bible study, but that the story is for and about ***all of us***, let me quote Jesus: “Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matthew 11:15)

This story is ripe for caricature and exaggeration and shaming — Martha, the busy bee in the kitchen, and Mary, the quiet, philosophical student. Martha, scolding her sister and Jesus, gets reprimanded in return. Mary, quietly sitting at Jesus’ feet, comes off looking good and faithful. But, if we hear the story that way, there are winners and losers and divisions in the household. Do you think that’s what Jesus really intended?

Perhaps we can get a clue about the meaning of this story for our lives if we think about Martha and Mary as John Calvin did when he wrote these comments 500 years ago:

“Luke says that Mary sat at the feet of Jesus. Does he mean that she did nothing else throughout her whole life? On the contrary, the Lord enjoins his followers to make such a distribution of their time, that he who desires to make proficient in the school of Christ shall not always be an idle hearer, but shall put into practice what he has learned; for there is a time to hear and a time to act. It is a foolish attempt . . . to take hold of this passage, as if Christ were drawing a comparison between a contemplative and an active life, while Christ simply informs us for what end and in what manner, he wishes to be received.”²

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey writes: Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree.

“What are you doing?” you ask.

“Can’t you see?” comes the impatient reply. “I’m sawing down this tree.”

“You look exhausted!” you exclaim. “How long have you been at it?”

“Over five hours,” he returns, “and I’m beat! This is hard work.”

“Well, why don’t you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw?” you inquire. “I’m sure it would go a lot faster.”

“I don’t have time to sharpen the saw,” the man says emphatically. “I’m too busy sawing!”³

Has God ever tried to get your attention through what might seem like random events? Over the years I’ve heard the phrase “sharpen your saw,” but it’s not something I’ve heard much or at all recently. On Wednesday I gave Cheryl the information for this morning’s bulletin, including the sermon title “Take Time to Sharpen Your Saw.” I spent Thursday morning at the First Baptist Church in Wilson, NC with five Baptist ministers. Our Pastor as Spiritual Guide group has been meeting now for seven years. Each time we get together, we spend some time “checking in” with each other and bringing each other up to date. Bill told us what he did on his three-month sabbatical this summer. I was sitting next to Bill when I heard him say, “On my next birthday I’ll be 60, so I’ve started thinking about what retirement will be like — what do I need to do to sharpen my saw for retirement and any ministry that I’ll be doing then?” Bill didn’t have any idea what today’s sermon title is. But his comment really got my attention!

Thursday night I checked Facebook and saw a post from Zach Casteen. Zach posted a link to an article called “The Disease of Being Busy,” which he recommended as a “great read!” Zach posted this quote: “Remember you are a human being, not a human doing.” The teaser for the article says, “Our over-scheduled lives leave little time for contemplation and reflection. How do we enable each other to pause and reflect together and ask how our hearts are doing?”⁴

That seems to be what’s at the heart of Jesus’ conversation with Martha. Let’s give Martha the benefit of the doubt. The traditional picture of Martha has her up to her elbows in soap-suds or with flour in her hair and bread dough on her hands — harried, frustrated, frazzled. But the story doesn’t give us any information to justify that picture. In fact, the story actually says, “Martha was distracted by her many **tasks**, her many (Greek) **diakonias** — “ministries, services, contributions, helps, supports, missions.” It can also mean “office of deacon or authority.” We get our word “deacon” from the same word. Maybe Martha was distracted and busy as she tried to be a good hostess and extend the kind of hospitality expected in her culture. Maybe, just maybe, she was also distracted and busy because she had lots of things on her mind as she tried to help and support other people. It’s just a thought.

Someone said the other day, “But we always need Marthas in the church!” To which I say, “Amen!” We need Marthas and Martins, and we’re glad we have the Marthas and Martins. Notice that Jesus didn’t reprimand Martha for being busy at whatever she was doing — cooking food, setting the table, checking on her ministries. No, listen to what Jesus said to Martha: “Martha, Martha, you are **worried** and **distracted** by many things.”

The words translated as “troubled and distracted” show up only here in Luke’s gospel, so it’s kind of hard to get a deep sense of what they mean. However, when Jesus comments that Martha is “worried,” we can grasp the deeper meaning because that word occurs in many places in the New Testament. For example:

* Jesus says, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Therefore do not worry, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’” (Matthew 6)

* When Jesus sent his disciples out to teach and heal, he told them, “When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.” (Luke 12:11-12)

* In Philippians 4, the apostle Paul gives this advice: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:6-7)

Some of you have read Henri Nouwen’s book, *Making All Things New*. If you haven’t read it, I highly recommend it. The book is small (only 5” X 7.5”) and fairly short (only 95 pages), but it contains some deep wisdom that has to do with what this story of Martha and Mary is all about. Nouwen uses Jesus’ words, “Do not worry,” as his point of departure. In a section called “Filled,” he says (and see if this doesn’t describe life these days, even your life): “One of the most obvious characteristics of our daily lives is that we are busy. We experience our days as filled with things to do, people to meet, projects to finish, letters to write, calls to make, and appointments to keep. Our lives often seem like overpacked suitcases bursting at the seams.” That busyness, Nouwen says, leads to our worrying — worrying that we haven’t done everything we need to do, worrying about what might happen, worrying that we’re missing out because we’re so busy. What a vicious cycle!

A little later on in the first part of his book, Nouwen writes, “One of the most notable characteristics of worrying is that it fragments our lives. The many things to do, to think about, to plan for, the many people to remember, to visit, or to talk with, the many causes to attack or defend, all these pull us apart and make us lose our center. Worrying causes us to be ‘all over the place,’ but seldom at home. One way to express the spiritual crisis of our time is to say that most of us have an address but cannot be found there. We know where we belong, but we keep being pulled away in many directions, as if we were still homeless. ‘All these other things’ keep demanding our

attention. They lead us so far from home that we eventually forget our true address, that is, the place where we can be addressed.”⁵

“We know where we belong . . .” The other title in the running for today’s sermon was “A Church at Jesus’ Feet.” We know where we belong . . . at Jesus’ feet, listening to what he is saying. But we can’t stay there all the time, just as Peter, James, and John couldn’t stay up on the mountain in the midst of Jesus’ transfiguration glory, but had to go back down the mountain into the valley, where they met a great crowd arguing with the other disciples because they couldn’t cast out an evil spirit from a man’s son. We can’t stay at Jesus’ feet all the time, just as the disciples couldn’t stay behind locked doors in Jerusalem, but went out to be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, after God’s Holy Spirit had come upon them. We can’t stay at Jesus’ feet all the time, for then we will be like the people James describes in his letter, “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

We know where we belong . . . at Jesus’ feet, listening to what he is saying. That’s where we need to start . . . and that’s where we need to return, again and again, as Christians, as the church. In that way, we will be better able to do what God in Christ calls us to do, based on what we hear God in Christ telling us. Fred Craddock, a wonderful interpreter and proclaimer of God’s Word, puts it this way: “If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment.”⁶ My good friend, Alex Evans, pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA, puts it this way, “We cannot make Christ known without knowing Christ.”⁷

Do you take time to sharpen your saw? Do you know Christ so you can make Christ known? Do you sit at Jesus’ feet, so you can get up and do in Jesus’ name? I encourage you to sit at Jesus’ feet — in your private devotions, by reading God’s Word, in your prayers. I encourage you to sit at Jesus’ feet here at the church — in Bible study, in Sunday School classes, in Presbyterian Women study groups, in small groups, in LOGOS, at Presbyterian Men.

I hope our church is never so busy “that we eventually forget our true address, that is, the place where we can be addressed.” (Nouwen) I hope we don’t sit around so much that we never go out and do in Jesus’ name. I hope we can be like Mary AND Martha!

Yesterday morning I sat down at my desk in my study to write this sermon. I literally “cleared my desk” of everything except the computer and a lighted candle. The gesture was symbolic — I wanted to clear away everything that might distract me and worry me, and I wanted to listen to what Jesus was saying. I asked God to help me choose “the better part” because I had many distractions. I needed to be focused on Jesus, I needed to sit at Jesus’ feet.

Once a month, I talk with a good friend, mentor, and spiritual director, Rev. Larry Williams, a retired Baptist minister. We talk in his office in Louisburg or on the phone. Larry is always interested in hearing about what I am **doing** in ministry. But, also, every time Larry and I talk, he asks me a question that is similar to the question in Zach's post on Facebook: "How is your heart doing?" Larry holds me accountable when he asks, "Are you talking with God?" When I hear Larry ask that question, I hear "Are you sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to what Jesus is saying?"

Wednesday morning I e-mailed Larry and said: "Larry, This morning I spent some time with God — being quiet, saying some prayers, and reading some devotions from *Meditations from Feasting on the Word*. This is the first prayer I found as I opened the book 'at random' (?): Sometimes the journey I face is difficult, and all I want to do is run away, retreat, lie down, escape from that which is front of me. Touch me, wake me, remind me to eat. Then I know I can eat and drink in the strength of your abiding presence, and it will be enough to get me through. Amen."

Sometimes we say, "I'm too busy to pray." A good and wise friend once said, "I'm too busy NOT to pray." The story of Martha and Mary reminds us not to be like the man in the forest who said, "I don't have time to sharpen the saw. I'm too busy sawing!"

Let us pray: Lord, help us to pause in silence and stillness in the midst of busy days, to listen for your voice, your words of peace, and your call in our lives, to love you and our neighbors; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹Adapted from Wesley White, www.kcmlection.blogspot.com.

²John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:143.

³Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw.

⁴Omid Safi, "The Disease of Being," www.onbeing.org.

⁵Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), pp. 36-37.

⁶Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 152.

⁷Alex Evans, "Choosing the Better Part," Luke 10:38f, July 21, 2013 at www.2presrichmond.org.