

C Lectionary 16 7.14.19

Luke 10:38-42

Focus Statement: Jesus brings life

If you're following along at home, you may have caught a bit of a switcheroo in the Gospel readings. The assigned text for today is actually the one right before this one, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. However, as the theme for Family Camp—which, quick commercial break, starts tomorrow, right here at 4 pm, be there or be a rectangle—the theme for Family Camp is the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Pastor Jennifer and I decided that rather than having both our congregations hear two sermons two weeks in a row on the same passage, and St. Peter even hearing the same person preach two weeks in a row on the same passage, we would both flip the weeks, preach on Mary and Martha this week, and save the Good Samaritan for next week.

And I'm going to preach on Mary and Martha. But I do want to start with a really quick recap of the Good Samaritan, because these two stories are presented right in a row for a reason and I think to truly understand the radical statement Jesus was making we need to first be made uncomfortable by the parable.

The parable starts with a lawyer standing to test Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Like today, a first century lawyer was an expert on the law. In the first century, the law being the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments as well as all the other laws spelled out in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, as well as all the rabbinic teachings on those laws over the centuries. So when Jesus flipped the question back to him, "what is written in the law," he knew the guy knew. And, as expected, the lawyer answered

correctly. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Love God, love your neighbor, is the most basic summary of the Ten Commandments, that’s what it comes down to. Love God, love your neighbor.

But, as humans are wont to do, this guy wasn’t after a simple explanation, he wanted details, “and who is my neighbor?” Again, commercial break, that is the title of Family Camp, and we’ll be learning this week all about who our neighbors are and how we can love them, but back to the story. So Jesus launched into this parable about this man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, a road that was notoriously dangerous and patrolled by bandits, when robbers attacked him, beat him, and left him for dead. Along came a priest, who certainly should have been familiar with the commandment to love his neighbor, but also would have known the laws against touching someone who was unclean, and faced with these conflicting narratives, decided to err on passing by the man. Next came a Levite, which was someone who worked in the Temple, and thus like the priest would have the conflicting obligations of neighborly responsibility versus ritual purity, and likewise passed by the man. Next down the road came a Samaritan. Now because this parable is so popular we all immediately know him to be the hero. But in Jesus’ time, Samaritan was as much a code for villain as a dark suit and spiral mustache was in old silent movies. You can almost hear the crowd booing as Jesus introduced him. So when the Samaritan is the one who stops along the way, cares for the man, and sets him up in an inn, those boos turned to stunned silence. This is Snidely Whiplash rescuing the damsel in distress from the train tracks, like this does not happen. That was the one who was the

neighbor to the man. Not the ones who had lived in all the right ways and done all the right things, but the one who, in that time, in that place, in that moment, helped out a person in need with no regard for their own reputation or standing. That is what it means to be a neighbor. Go and do likewise.

But “love your neighbor” was not the only law the lawyer answered to Jesus. In fact, while it was the one the lawyer asked a follow-up question about, in the initial response “love your neighbor as yourself” seemed like almost an afterthought to the law that preceded it, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.” So if the Parable of the Good Samaritan is the answer to the question, what does it look like to love my neighbor, the Martha and Mary story may then be the answer to the question, what does it look like to love God. And if that’s the case, then it’s important to let both of these stories together both comfort and challenge us, because the way to life then is somewhere in between.

So, opening confession, this is not my favorite text. First off, because there are a seemingly infinite number of women’s spirituality books dedicated to determining whether you are a “Mary” or a “Martha.” And I know a lot of people for whom that question is very powerful and meaningful, and if a book on that theme has changed your life, that’s amazing, and I’m super glad. But for me, any book I’ve tried around that question always felt like judgment, like I was doing it wrong somehow. And I think I’ve always felt that way because I relate to Martha. There is zero biblical evidence of this, but in the family Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, I’ve always read Martha as the focused, driven older sister, the one who keeps everyone on

track, Lazarus as the peace-making middle brother, and Mary, with her dramatic running to Jesus in tears in John's Gospel as the dramatic youngest child, who does what she wants when she wants. This probably tells you more about my family of origin than about the bible text, but there you go. So I relate to Martha. I relate to her need for order and structure, to her "first things first" approach to hospitality, and to her comfortable being backstage work ethic.

And if we think back to the lawyer's question, Martha was doing exactly what was asked of her, Martha was loving her neighbor. There are all sorts of laws in the bible about the requirement to show hospitality to strangers, to take care of travelers. These laws were about more than just being welcoming; these were literally questions of life and death. It's not like there was a Holiday Inn first century travelers could check into, if they did not receive hospitality from people they met along the way, the consequences were dire. To travel in the first century was to place your life in the hands of others and hope they would take care of you, welcome you, provide what you need. So these "many tasks" that are described as "distracting" Martha, these are the Mosaic obligations she owed to visitors in her care. And the story only speaks of Jesus, but let's face it, by this point in the Gospel Jesus was never on his own. There's probably fifteen or twenty, dusty, hungry, road-weary men in Martha's home, men she is obligated to care for. So to say that the problem is as simple as Martha having her priorities out of order is I think to sell Martha, and Jesus short. Jesus just finished telling a story about a Samaritan who took care of a man in need, so certainly the problem here wasn't Martha's wanted to care for needy travelers.

But there's more going on here with Mary too. You may have noticed that all of Jesus' disciples were men. This was not a coincidence or an oversight, discipleship was men's work. To sit at the feet of a teacher, any teacher, not just Jesus, and to learn from him, that was the proper and appropriate place of men. Only men belonged in those roles. So what Mary did when she sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying wasn't about having her priorities in the right order and taking time to listen to Jesus, it wasn't about putting prayer before work, or valuing God over all things. What Mary did when she sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying was make a profound statement about who was welcome, who was able even, to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Like Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech or Kathrine Switzer's hiding her gender to enter the Boston Marathon, Mary's seat at the feet of Jesus was about expanding the understanding of who was welcome at the table. Mary, and Truth, and Switzer belonged because they could do the work, and gender identity or expression had no bearing on their ability.

So I think the real problem with Martha wasn't that she was focused on work and distracted from worship, I think the problem was she was willing to let expectations dictate what her role was. Martha couldn't love God because she was too busy worrying not about her neighbor, but about what her neighbor thought of her. And, similarly, the priest and the Levite couldn't love their neighbor, because they were too busy worrying not about God, but about if they were living up to their understanding of the ritual purity God demanded of them.

As is so often the case with Jesus' teachings, this story leaves us not with a clear-cut answer, but with the wonderful greyness of maybe. The command is to love God AND your neighbor. Too much love of God and we risk ignoring the neighbor, but too much focus on our neighbor can leave us missing God. So how then do we live? There is not hard and fast answer that works every time. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha reminds us that each decision is situational. Some days, like the Samaritan on the road, like Mary at the feet of Jesus, we get it right. Other times, like Martha's overwrought hospitality or the priest and the Levite's misplaced piety, we get it wrong. So we come to the font, we come to the table, we confess our sin, know we are forgiven, and we try again tomorrow. But there is a helpful litmus test in trying to figure out how to respond, and that test is this, one simple question: Does this bring life? Does this bring life to myself and those around me? Mary's piety brought life; it expanded the understanding of who could follow Jesus. The priest and the Levite's did not; it left a man on the road to die. The Samaritan's service brought life; it helped a man in need. Martha's did not, it left her frustrated and overwhelmed.

The laws worth following, the services worth performing are the ones that bring life to yourself and those around you. Have life, bring life. That is what it means to love God and love your neighbor. Thanks be to God. Amen.