

Sermon
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
July 11, 2010

Luke 10:25-37
Luke 10:38-42

A Balancing Act

Pastors should mow their own lawns. Of course most pastors cannot afford to hire a lawn service but that is beside the point. Pastors should mow their lawns because it provides the perfect opportunity to mull over tough biblical passages or stew on sermon topics. John and I had never discussed this particular aspect of ministry when we were kicking around a sermon text and some ideas a couple of weeks ago. The next day I asked him if he had decided in what direction he was going with his sermon. His response was “yes, I mowed my lawn last night and worked it out.” I knew exactly what he meant. Even though it got to 101 degrees this week I needed some yard time in preparation for this sermon.

When I learned I was going to be preaching today I first looked at the Revised Common Lectionary to see what the scripture readings were. The Revised Common Lectionary, you may know, is a collection of Bible readings for each Sunday used by many churches around the world. Set up on a 3 year cycle, the lectionary provides a common platform of readings from which pastors may choose to preach. This summer the lectionary Gospel readings are from Luke chronicling Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and when I saw that today’s passage was the story of the Good Samaritan I knew I had my text. But I could only preach this, I thought, if I included the next story as well, the story of Mary and Martha. I looked and sure enough the Mary Martha story is the Gospel reading for next week. So I’m all set to go, as long as I remember to tell John not to choose the Gospel lectionary passage for next week. I have my texts and a general idea of the direction in which I wanted to go. One thing I had failed to

account for however is how difficult it can be to preach on familiar passages and it's hard to get much more familiar than these. So after spinning my wheels for a few weeks I got out the lawnmower and went to work preparing my sermon.

I discovered something while reading the Bible, probably about 10 to 12 years ago.

What I discovered is that the Mary / Martha story immediately follows the Good Samaritan story. Now that may not seem like a big deal but it was to me at the time because I had always heard those stories in isolation. The best known stories are often the most difficult to understand. They are certainly harder to preach on because while you may be interested in what I have to say it is almost impossible to listen without filtering it through the lens of a long held interpretation. The two stories we have before us today; the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha certainly fall into this category. We will look at how we traditionally view these passages but I also want to go deeper. I want to look at these stories as I think they were intended, to be read together as part of Luke's narrative to make a compelling and radical point.

I think the 10th chapter of Luke just may be the richest, most interesting chapter in the Bible. A little context is important here so let me set this up. In chapter 9 Jesus has set his sights on Jerusalem and the rest of the book concerns that journey to the cross. Jesus' strategy is to prepare the places to which he is to travel for his arrival so as chapter 10 begins he commissions 70 of his followers to go out in pairs to all of the towns where he intended to visit. He gave them the authority to heal the sick and cast out demons. This is the story where Jesus tells them what to take with them and to shake the dust off their feet if they are not welcome somewhere. When the 70 return telling of the success of their mission Jesus celebrates with them and then turns to them privately in verse 23 and says "blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it." So that brings us to our texts for today

which make up the remainder of chapter 10. The parable of the Good Samaritan, at least the gist of it, is almost as well known in the secular world as it is in the church. When folks stop to help a stranded traveler they are often referred to as good Samaritans. We have Good Samaritan hospitals, the Presbyterian Samaritan Counseling Center; we even have Good Samaritan laws on the books in many states protecting those who choose to serve and tend to others who are injured or ill. They are intended to reduce bystanders' hesitation to assist, for fear of being sued. So it's no wonder we have a preconceived understanding of what this parable means. This may be the most easily understood parable Jesus ever told. Maybe.

It begins when a lawyer stands up and challenges Jesus with a question. And he is clearly challenging him. The Greek term used here means “test” or “tempting” and signals explicitly the challenge to one’s honor that is posed by any question. In this society there was no other value greater than protecting one’s honor. Jesus’ response is to come back with a question of his own, now challenging the lawyer’s honor. But the lawyer performs well. Being an expert in the law he answers Jesus brilliantly by taking the Shema from Deuteronomy which by custom was repeated twice daily and linking it with the neighbor passage from Leviticus. Now in Mark and Matthew we know this as the great commandment and it comes from Jesus but here Luke is up to something different. Now Jesus had gained the upper hand in the challenge – response debate by making the lawyer answer his own question and challenging him to put his answer into practice. If the lawyer stops now he has lost honor in the exchange

so he poses a question that would be sure to cause some controversy, “and who is my neighbor”? And thus begins the parable we know so well. We know it right. A man is robbed and beaten and left for dead. A priest and a Levite pass by without offering assistance but a third man, a Samaritan, comes along and does stop. He treats the beaten man with generous compassion and arranges for his care before he continues on his way. Of course we are to glean from this that if we are to love our neighbor as Jesus teaches then we too must stop and

show compassion to those in need. Well, it's certainly hard to argue with that but I think Jesus and Luke are up to much more here. Jesus' parable knocks the lawyer right in the face and probably shocks everyone else around listening. According to the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary the story reached its zenith when the Levite passed by. By conventional storytelling standards the audience can expect that in a series of three, the third character will break the pattern created by the first two. Moreover, the expected sequence would be a priest a Levite and an Israelite. The story would then have an anti-Temple slant to it with the ordinary Israelite doing what the priest and Levite would not. But Jesus throws them a nasty curveball. By making the Samaritan the hero of the story Jesus has shattered all expectations and challenged the longstanding enmity between Jews and Samaritans. The hatred between these two groups had gone on for hundreds of years. Noted British bishop, author and New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says that this hatred is still reflected tragically in the smoldering tension between Israel and Palestine today. Both sides claimed to be the true inheritors of the promises to Abraham and Moses; both sides regarded themselves as the rightful possessors of the land. Few Israelis today will travel from Galilee to Jerusalem by the direct route because it will take them through the West Bank and risk violence. In exactly the same way most first century travelers making the same journey would prefer, as Jesus himself did, to travel down the Jordan valley to Jericho and then turn west up the hill to Jerusalem. Samaritans were a mixed race people, remnants of those left behind during the Assyrian exile who had inter-married with gentile settlers and built their own temple in a city other than Jerusalem. They were considered unclean by the people of Israel. So this is the example of neighbor Jesus gives them. The lawyer is so disgusted and put to shame by the whole thing he cannot even refer to the Samaritan directly. When Jesus asks him "which of these three was the neighbor to the man that fell into the hands of robbers" the lawyer answers, "the one who showed him mercy". Jesus is doing much more than simply saying we should all be neighborly and help those we see in need. He is breaking down the boundaries and walls that keep us divided. Naming the third

character in this drama a Samaritan not only challenges the hearers to examine the stereotype regarding Samaritans, but it also invalidates all stereotypes. Community can no longer be defined or limited by such terms.

Now at this juncture Luke does a fascinating thing. He takes this completely unrelated story about Jesus' visit to Martha's house and plops it down right after the Good Samaritan parable. If you think this is simply the next stop on the journey you would be wrong. We know from other references in the gospels that Martha's house is in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. It's where Jesus stayed during his final week. At this point in Luke though Jesus has just started heading to Jerusalem. It's only chapter 10 and he won't arrive for his triumphal Palm Sunday entrance until the end of chapter 19. No Luke has put these two stories together for a reason and it is our task to look at it in that light and see if there is not a word for us in our own time and place. Many Biblical scholars say that there are two types of stories to pay particular attention to in the gospels. Stories that occur in all 4 gospels, of which there are few, and stories that appear in only one gospel. Luke chapter 10 is the only place you will find a version of the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha, and they are placed side by side.

This story of Mary and Martha is not as well known as the Good Samaritan in secular circles but has kind of wiggled its way into our lexicon, especially in the church. There are books like Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World and my personal favorite Mary's Prayers and Martha's Recipes. In situations such as women's retreats, Bible studies and prayer groups if a reference is made to being a Mary or Martha most people know what that means. This story is short yet classic and reads great directly from our 21st century perspective. Martha is too busy. She is a type A person, a doer. To be awake is to be accomplishing something. Everyone here today can relate to Martha, we either are her or know someone who is. Mary on the other hand is what all the modern day Martha's profess they need to be more like. Less busy, less scheduled, making time for quiet reflection and prayer. Jesus said Mary chose the right thing so I need to choose

the right thing, at least every now and then. Mary has caused many women much guilt and angst. You really can't win for losing. If you are too much like Martha you feel bad at not putting more Mary in your life. If you try to take some Mary time there is Martha reminding you of all that needs to be done. It reminds me of those little angels and devils who used to pop up on shoulders in old movies and cartoons, each staking out an ear to try to convince someone to see things their way. Of course we should all try to strike some sort of balance in our lives, getting things done but also allowing for quiet worshipful time and relaxation. But I don't think that has anything to do with our text as Luke presents it. I think Luke is arguing for a balancing act of a different kind. Jesus has once again turned conventional wisdom on its ear and acted contrary to expectations. In that place and time it was the men that sat at the feet of a teacher. The Apostle Paul for instance is described in the book of Acts as having learned at the feet of the respected rabbi Gamaliel. In that culture, as in many parts of the world today, houses were divided into male space and female space and male female roles were rigidly drawn. For Mary to have taken a seat at Jesus feet was scandalous. Martha's complaint would have been seen as legitimate and Jesus would have been expected to side with her. But instead Jesus affirms Mary's right to break through the gender role barricade and sit and learn at his feet. I think we are wrong to see Mary and Martha as they have so often been depicted, as examples of the "active" and contemplative" styles of spirituality. There's no doubt we are all called to varying degrees of balance but we miss the challenge of this passage by turning it into a comment about the different types of the Christian lifestyle.

Let me pause here for a moment and take us back to the set up for today's scripture.

Remember the 70 have returned from their mission trip, joyous over the success they had in casting out demons and healing the sick. Jesus gets caught up in the excitement and then takes them aside and says to them "blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it..." Having blessed his

disciples for seeing, Jesus now has two encounters with people who do not see; the lawyer and Martha. And by not seeing they are missing Jesus' radical call to discipleship. It would be nice and safe to simply hold on to our traditional, spiritualized meanings for these stories. Help people in need like the Samaritan did and make Jesus a priority like Mary did. But it ignores the very essence of the message as Luke has constructed it. That message is a call to radical love and resistance. Love of neighbor is to align with the most despised of our society. To not only tend to them but let them tend to us. We haven't even talked about that aspect of the story, that a man, presumably an Israelite, had to let a hated Samaritan care for him when he was at his most vulnerable. You may think of course someone in his situation is not going to care who is helping him but we have some ugly history in this country that says otherwise. During World War 2 our armed forces had a policy that donated blood was to be kept segregated. White blood for whites, black blood for blacks. People died rather than having their blood mixed. Now that's an example of not being able to see. Samaritans loving Israelites? That's crazy love. Women, assuming the roles of men? That's in your face resistance against unfair systems of family and social structure. People have long referred to Jesus' parables as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Baptist seminary professor William Herzog says rather they are earthy stories with heavy meanings. And Luke lays some heavy stuff on us today. Love God and love neighbor. Love God by fighting the social structures and systems that work to keep people in their place. Love neighbor but first redefine neighbor. Love the unlovable and allow them to love you. It's a balancing act this Christian life, neither the story of the good Samaritan nor the story of Mary and Martha are complete without the other. The model for the would be disciple is found in the juxtaposition of the two. To the lawyer Jesus says "go and do", to Mary he essentially says "sit and listen. The life of the disciple requires both.

In its own way the conjunction of stories about the Good Samaritan and the female disciple voice Jesus' protest against the rules and boundaries set by the culture in which he lived.

As they develop seeing and hearing as metaphors for how life should be in the kingdom the stories also expose the injustice of social barriers that categorize, restrict and oppress various groups in any society. To love God with all one's heart and one's neighbor as oneself meant then and now that one must always reject society's rules in favor of the codes of the kingdom. But that is hard to do, we would rather simply try to be more helpful to people in need or be less busy. But the rules of this kingdom society are just two, to love God and one's neighbor. Two rules that are so radically different from those of our society that following them invariably calls us to disregard all else, break the rules and follow Jesus' example. It's the ultimate balancing act. Live this way and we will know the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven.

In the name of the Triune God

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

Amen.