

Mary and Martha: Doing and Doing Nothing

Luke 10:38-42 by Patty Friesen (July 17/22)

Today's scriptures are about journeying and staying home - both honoured ways of following Jesus. A physical journey traditionally means a movement in the spiritual life - trusting God in new ways when we don't really know what lies ahead and what the outcome will be. But today's encounter with Jesus in the intimate setting in Mary and Martha's home suggests that those of us who are stuck at home all summer can also experience God in deeper ways even or especially if we do nothing.

Luke 10 begins with the commissioning of the disciples to travel to new places and eat with new people. The parable of the Good Samaritan is the story of four travelers with the priority of the command to love God by loving one's neighbour. The story of the Good Samaritan then develops the meaning of who is our neighbor - that we find Christ in some pretty interesting people, as Ed Olfert shared last week.

We learn a lot when we get out of our comfort zones and get to know new people. I'm proud of our children going to camp for the first time to meet new people and learn new things and we'll hopefully hear about that next week. I'm proud of our youth going with Dayna and Matthew Stefaniuk and Alex Tiessen to Amplify Mennonite Youth Conference at Camp Valaqua in Alberta to make new friends and learn more about God in a stunning setting in the mountains and we'll hear from them in August. I'm proud of Pastor Nora for going beyond her comfort zone and going to Indonesia to worship with our Mennonite sisters and brothers from around the world. These are cutting edge spiritual experiences with travel and new experiences of God and others.

Set in their home, the story of Mary and Martha highlights the overriding importance of staying put and sitting with God's Word as an expression of one's love for God. The Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha are parallel stories. The story of the Good Samaritan features "a certain man", while Martha is introduced as "a certain woman". The Good Samaritan exemplifies the disciples' seeing in a new way. Mary exemplifies the virtue of hearing in a new way. Moreover, both the Samaritan and Mary, a woman, represent marginalized persons—unlikely heroes. As a composite, they are model disciples: "those who sit and hear the word of God and those who do it."

The encounter with Mary and Martha is set in the context of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and echoes the journey instructions previously given to the disciples about eating together. "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you." Martha welcomes Jesus and begins preparing a meal for him. The complication appears when we are told that Mary, Martha's sister, is sitting at Jesus' feet in the place of a disciple; and listening to his word. The scene resonates positively and negatively with rabbinic lore: "Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst . . . [but] talk not much with womankind." By sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary is acting like a male. She neglects her duty to assist her sister in the preparation of the meal, and by violating a clear social boundary she is bringing shame upon her house.

Jesus' response to Martha forms the climax of this scene. The repetition of her name, "Martha, Martha," conveys a mild rebuke or lament. Like demons, her cares about fulfilling her duties have thrown her life into disorder. Like thorns, they have prevented her from attending to Jesus' teachings. Martha is anxious about many things,

but only one thing is needed. This is a reminder that the duty of the love of God takes precedence over all other concerns.

Neither the story of the Good Samaritan nor the story of Mary and Martha is complete without the other. Each makes its own point—the Samaritan loves his neighbour, and Mary loves her Lord—but the model for the disciple is found in the juxtaposition of the two. To the lawyer, Jesus says, “Go and do likewise,” but he praises Mary for doing nothing - for sitting and listening. The life of a disciple requires both.

I wanted to “go and do” on with Mennonite Disaster Service last week. Patrick wondered why I was “going and doing” with MDS in B.C. when our own house and garden on Coy Avenue was a Mennonite Disaster that needed some “doing.” I told him it’s more fun cleaning up someone else’s mess. I really wanted to do MDS because I see God most clearly in my life when I do service - when I’m pushed in new ways and new situations and in getting to know new interesting people who blow up my stereotypes. It was really disappointing to miss my train to MDS. Mom said maybe it was God’s will that I missed the train so I could take her to the bank. I guess I was doing Mother Dear Service instead.

My first Mennonite Disaster Service experience was when I was in university in 1986 when a tornado came through Edmonton and I went with our church Holyrood Mennonite to clean up a trailer park that had blown apart in the storm. Picking up people’s wedding pictures out of mud made an impression that has lasted these 35 years. In 1998 when we lived in Minneapolis, Patrick and I went out after a tornado to clean up a farmer’s field, walking side by side, arms width apart cleaning up a field before harvest - much like MDS volunteers did here in Osler after the July 4, 1996

storm. The Minnesota rural community served volunteers a supper in a church basement afterwards, just as Oslerites served MDS volunteers in the Osler Community Hall.

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a group of women from our church in Minneapolis went to paint a Honduran Mennonite church in New Orleans. On the last night, these lovely church people took us out for shrimp jambalaya as a thank-you and gave us a tour of the 9th Ward that still hasn't fully recovered 17 years later. They talked about the collective trauma of the hurricane and listening to their grief as outsiders seemed to be as important as the church painting. Audrey Kampen shared that in her MDS report in May that listening to homeowners was as important as shoveling mud.

Sitting and listening at home is not my go to spirituality. I'm a Martha - through and through, combined with a bit of attention deficit of the soul as I scurry to get things done at home and church. But the change of my MDS plan forced a different kind of week. The change of plan opened up opportunities to worship at Nutana Park again which doesn't happen very often. Then suddenly I had unscheduled time to do some visits that have blessed my week. Suddenly I had time to read some delicious new church library books on liberation spirituality. I was forced to slow down and give my undivided attention to whatever was in front of me - people or books or weeding.

There is a Zen saying that points to the importance of an undivided consciousness: When you eat, just eat. When you sit, just sit. It's the same mindful sitting and listening of Mary of Bethany enters allows her to hear Jesus deeply. And Jesus wants to be heard in our lives. During the pandemic, we all had more time to sit and listen because we couldn't go and do. Some of us are missing those quieter days of

reading and reflecting - *pandemic nostalgia* as some of our introverted pastor colleagues are calling it - when we had more time to read and bake and make art because we were forced to do nothing and were bored out of our skulls.

Now we have to more intentionally do nothing and have ordinary days for the sake of our souls. I'll prayerfully close with the poem *Ordinary Life* by Barbara Crooker.

This was a day when nothing happened,
the children went off to school
without a murmur, remembering
their books, lunches, gloves.
All morning, the baby and I built block stacks
in the squares of light on the floor.
And lunch blended into nap time,
I cleaned out kitchen cupboards,
one of those jobs that never gets done,
then sat in a circle of sunlight
and drank ginger tea,
watched the birds at the feeder
jostle over lunch's little scraps.
A pheasant strutted from the hedgerow,
preened and flashed his jeweled head.
Now a chicken roasts in the pan,
and the children return,
the murmur of their stories dappling the air.
I peel carrots and potatoes without paring my thumb.
We listen together for your heels on the drive.
Grace before bread.
and at the table, actual conversation,
no bickering or pokes.
And then, the drift into homework.
The baby goes to his cars, drives them
along the sofa's ridges and hills.
Leaning by the counter, we steal a long slow kiss,
tasting of coffee and cream.
The chicken's diminished to skin & skeleton,
the moon to a comma, a sliver of white,
but this has been a day of grace
in the dead of winter,
the hard-cold knuckle of the year,
a day that unwrapped itself
like an unexpected gift,
and the stars turn on,

order themselves
into the winter night.

Amen.

Sing: I heard the voice of Jesus say #536 VT