

Luke 10:38-42
The Nourished Soul
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We're now in the fourth week in a series in which we're looking at the way in which walking with Jesus will in one way or another turn the tables in our lives. Often times, Jesus heals people by telling them to stand up and walk. But perhaps the greater miracle is the one he does when he tells us to sit down. Jesus has a habit of showing up at mealtimes and turning the tables on our expectations. What we expect is that there is a God up in heaven, but what Jesus does is surprise us that heaven is actually coming into earth, and that at every turn, this is an invitation to us to participate in what God is doing around places like dinner tables.

Jesus comes into our lives to announce and reveal the kingdom of God breaking into earth. In the last few weeks, we've seen that in the way his disciples in the presence of God multiplied the gifts of bread and fish to meet the needs of others. And last week, Kari did a wonderful job of showing us how Jesus sends out his disciples. He doesn't just collect more disciples, like baseball cards, to sit with him; no, he tells them to go. And he sends them with a word of peace that brings blessing to those around them.

Today as we move forward in Luke's gospel, we see that Jesus is forming us spiritually, and the way that begins is with an invitation to sit down. So I invite you to reach for the pew Bible or the one you brought with you, and open to Luke chapter 10 verses 38-42, and sit with me as we hear the word of the Lord.

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

There are two postures demonstrated in today's reading, and then there is a good portion. First, Martha. Martha is standing. And there is no reason why we should expect otherwise. It seems that she may be the master of the house, perhaps a widow. She is a sister to Mary and to Lazarus. Martha initiates this encounter; Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. She is standing to serve, and this is just what she should be doing. There is a meal to be had and preparations to be made; Martha is seeing to it that all those who are hungry are nourished.

Throughout the church's history, this text has been used to justify or vindicate the contemplative life. The teaching of Aristotle and Plato crept into the church's early theology to say that what was truly important was the life of the mind and the spirit, that physical work and exertion was somehow beneath the spiritual—a very Greek mentality.

But when the reformers came along, Luther and Calvin they said no, Martha's service is as important to this story as Mary's sitting. Martha does well to care for the physical needs. The word that gets used in verse 40 for service is the Greek word *Diakonia*, deacon, one who engages in active service. Jesus doesn't criticize Martha for her service. Her hospitality is an act of generous love, the same way Mary's breaking a vial of perfume over Jesus is an act of sacrificial giving and love.

But Martha does have a problem and she knows it, and she calls for help. Martha's problem is that she is caught, caught in an all too common loop of getting so caught up in work that she can't seem to break out. This reminds me of a vignette I saw recently on a program called *Portlandia*. It's a parody of life in the Northwest. In this clip, Fred Armison is caught. He's caught in a technology loop, and he calls for help.

Martha doesn't know what her problem is, but she knows she's got one. It takes Jesus to put his finger on the issue of the matter. In verse 41, Jesus says, "Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things." Jesus says to Martha, "Your service, as meaningful and important as it may be, has you in its grip and it is pulling you around. Your service is calling the shots over your spirit. It's pulling you away from the one who is the inspiration for your service. Martha, Martha you're being pulled around, dragged farther and farther away from the most important thing, me."

Not only is Martha physically distant from Jesus – it says in verse 40 that Martha had to travel across the home to be near him – but Martha is spiritually distant, as well. Martha asks Jesus, "Do you not care?" Now she's beginning to question the heart of her Savior. You see, Martha thinks that her problem is a work problem, or a relationship problem. "Do you not care that *my sister* (relationship) has left me alone to serve (work)?" But what Jesus shows her is that her problem is that she stands. But it's *how* she stands. She is worried, busy, harried, she's caught in a work loop, exhausted, overcome, and bitter.

The second posture is Mary's. Mary is sitting at the Lord's feet and that is one of radical freedom. This posture Mary has is one of an academic relationship in the first century. Students sat at the feet of teachers. So Mary is sitting as a learner. This is not just describing the posture someone who has found some new freedom, but this is one of someone who has found radical liberation, deep meaning. Commentator NT Wright says that Martha's problem with Mary is not just that she's not getting the help she needs, it is that Mary is acting like a man. She's taking the position of a student to a first century male rabbi, and that is unthinkable—A.) that Jesus would allow it in the first place, and B.) that she would have the audacity to do it. The world is turning upside down in Martha's home.

What is it about Jesus that allows Mary to throw off this conforming narrative of a woman's role in the first century, and give her the freedom and the courage to do this radical thing? Something has happened now to Mary that is enabling her to resist all the stereotypes, all the expectations, all the cultural norms and societal rules and just sit at the feet of the rabbi.

Mary is being liberated as a woman, not just from a life of housework and chores, chauffeuring kids to soccer practice and cello lessons, and caring for her husband. Mary is equally liberated from the notion that what she can do outside the home is indicative of her value. Mary isn't liberated from one rat race, only to take up another type of rat race. Mary is invited to see a new posture of living. The question is asked not "where do you stand?" but "can you sit?" Jesus is the one thing that is needed and it will never be taken away from her.

Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. This word for teaching is the Greek word *Logos*, the word. Mary sat and listened to the Word. God's Word has the incomprehensible ability to change our lives. It has the power to heal a centurion's servant from afar, it has the power to raise a man from the dead, it has the power to turn a life that is inward and self-focused into a life of service and compassion for others. It is the word of the Lord that has the power to calm the storms and give the bedrock foundation that will enable us to withstand all of life's storms. It is the living word that is sharper than any two edged sword, judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart. This word sown into our lives bears the fruit of heaven.

But it is not simply listening and doing what it says that sets us free. That might be Martha's spirituality, but it is not Mary's as she sits in this moment. The word that is shared in this event is not simply what is heard by Mary and Martha, but it is the meal, the good portion, as it says in verse 41, that Mary has chosen. Martha might think that hers is the only meal that is being served here, but if you look closely, when Jesus says that in all the preparations Mary chooses the good portion—as in a meal. Martha labors over the meal that keeps her distracted and worried. It's the one that keeps her trying to do something, something pleasing, something of worth, something ministry related for Jesus. Martha's service is all about what she does for Jesus. Don't get me wrong, her offer is generous, but it's still hers.

The other meal is not a physical meal, it's a metaphorical meal. One that will never be taken away. It's him, it's Jesus, the one who sits in their home with them and offers himself as the very bread of heaven as their feast. Do you see how it has Eucharistic overtones? We don't come to the table when we gather and say to God, do you like the bread we've baked, do you approve of the juice we share, are these gifts suitable for you? No, we come to the table because Jesus is all sufficient. When we come to the table, we enter into his presence through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus invites Martha to come and sit with Mary, not because she deserves or chooses it, or whether it makes her feel good or feel spiritual, Jesus invites her because that is his way of making known to her God's intentions for her life. God loves Martha so much that he became like Martha in her humanness, so that she would understand the invitation that he is offering to her and to you and me.

Jesus is the bread of life. We feed on his Word, on his identity, on his presence. As we abide, rest, sit in him, he changes us out of his presence, his life. So as you go back into your lives this week, remember the good portion, the one that comes from feasting on the Word of God and letting that presence dwell, infuse, resonate, transform us.