



July 17, 2016

LarryDeLong

Balance – Luke 10:38-42

Mary and Martha are in each of us. We are caught between our desire and commitment to God and at the same time to the things that just have to get done. That is a basic tension of the Gospel, and this story points it out clearly. We've probably all known people that are so heavenly-minded that they're no earthly good to anyone.

God gave the people of Israel instructions on how to go about the business of daily living, and told them that in doing that business the way God wanted, they honored God. But in this story, or at least the way most people hear it, something else seems to be going on.

It feels like Jesus' response to Martha muddies the water. He backs Mary's desire to sit at his feet and listen to him, saying that she's made the best choice. Although, he doesn't tell Martha to drop what she's doing, either.

What does that say to us? Are we supposed to always choose what Jesus calls “the better part,” and do nothing but listen to him? What about taking care of the business of life, like getting food?

Mary, and Martha. Being, and doing. Relying on God, and getting the groceries.

So we are left, not just as individuals but as the church, with the tension between wanting to sit at Jesus’ feet and doing the things that must be done to support that devotion. We, here, as a church, worship – but there is much that is done to support that worship, lots of pieces that come together in this time, that don’t seem particularly worshipful. It’s never either/or, there is a balance.

The church is the people, of course. The purpose of the church, as a body, is to inspire, support, and equip the church, the people, for the work of devotion to Christ. But the church is, as we experience it, also a building and organization, and it involves people with all their complexities. Good, and bad. People. Still, the church isn’t just some association of people, some club – it’s about God.

Last week, a summary of a report presented to our Session from the Presbytery’s Commission on Ministry was distributed. The Presbytery is our regional group of Presbyterian churches, the Commission on Ministry is the part of Presbytery that is charged with caring for those churches.

A couple of months ago, the Presbytery Pastor received concerns about leadership at Valley. This especially concerned the Commission on Ministry because they have been involved before in disputes during Valley's history. The Presbytery Pastor and two others representing the Commission on Ministry interviewed our elders on Session as well as Deacons, members, and staff.

Last month they brought to Session their observations and recommendations for Session's information and action. Session summarized those for you, and that was what was distributed last week.

If you read the summary, you may well have wondered what it was all about or why you hadn't heard of these things before. Hopefully, this helps.

The whole process demonstrates Presbytery's concern for Valley church. What the Presbytery team reported, and is in the summary, is that first, there is disagreement within the church. The team recognizes from the Commission on Ministry's past experience that a pattern of difficulties exists here at Valley, and, quote, "this pattern has existed during previous pastorates, which makes addressing these issues even more critical." In other words, they want to help us fix things now.

Scripture and our denomination's Constitution make clear that a critical component of the Church's work is reconciliation. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church in their struggles, "God...

reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” So, the first of three purposes the Presbytery has for Valley is reconciliation.

Accordingly, the first recommendation the Commission made is “that Session quickly initiate mediation between persons in expressed disagreement...” Session agreed, and at their meeting with the Presbytery team, named some who are at odds with one another as a start. The Presbytery Pastor, Dr. Brad Munroe, who has been trained in mediation, offered his services, along with another trained mediator. He began that process with invitations to two of the most vocal parties. They both refused to participate in mediation, emphatically.

The mediation process will continue. The Presbytery has created an Administrative Commission to bring an outside perspective, a helping hand and voice, to work with and among us here at Valley for at least a year so that the negative pattern can be broken and we more fully can be the church we work so hard to be. We can show Christian witness in our willingness to be reconciled, to live together in love. We can stop being worried and distracted over many things.

Mediation and reconciliation do not necessarily mean that disagreements are over and done. My own guess is that Martha didn't

think to herself, “OK, Jesus, that’s great! I’ll just get on with doing Mary’s job too. I’m so happy!” But at the very least the points of disagreement are out in the open, and people can agree to disagree so that necessary work can go on.

Refusing mediation and reconciliation does not help the church. The Presbytery did not take that refusal lightly, and the Session responded appropriately. I ask you to support Session as they work, with the help of Presbytery, to address whatever issues continue to trouble this church.

Situations like this are never easy. In churches when there is conflict, people are pulled in many ways – our faith, our friendships, our memories, our families, our worship are all mixed up. It’s easy to get dragged far from what we ought to be about as disciples of Christ. We certainly don’t feel like we’re sitting at Jesus’ feet.

And a big problem for leaders in the church is how to keep the Christian work of the church going, working out reconciliation within, without disillusioning those who simply want to worship God, to be the church.

Even though faithful people may feel pulled in many directions, challenged to their very core by conflicting ideas and emotions, it’s in our faith that we can find Jesus’ “better part.” As human beings, we can only seek God’s balance between work and worship, the balance we

need to get on with being faithful. God calls us to worship, and we at Valley seek to worship God in Spirit and in truth. As a wise person once said, “Never let a person get between you and God.”

We are imperfect beings, all of us, certainly me. None of us is worthy to even come close to God except by the mediation and reconciliation of Jesus Christ. Yet here we are, at God’s invitation. May we learn how to be both Martha and Mary.