



July 24, 2013

Larry DeLong

M&M's – Luke 10:38-42

Here's a lesson we've heard before... I always confuse who's Mary and who's Martha, though. Mary's the one who's immersing herself in Jesus and his words of life; Martha's the one taking care of the guests. One's out in the living room; the other's slaving over the stove. We've lived a scene or two like this, haven't we?

Jesus himself says that Mary's made the right choice, sitting and listening to his teaching, and that statement, that Martha's work is less important, has dogged doers ever since. But we've missed something if that's as far as we gotten into this story.

Yesterday afternoon, during that wonderful thunderstorm, I found a chair in our house that let me look out at the rain and the sky and the evidence of the wind. I could feel my anxieties and cares dissolving with the raindrops... I had a cup of fresh coffee, sipped it, thought some more about this passage and what Seth, my son, was up to and listened to Valerie try to put a bow in one of the dog's hair. When the coffee was gone, I leaned back and closed my eyes... the rain had nearly passed, but the sound of the water was so soothing, I felt myself drifting off into a nap.

And then I remembered it was Saturday, and I needed to spend some more time with this sermon, and that was the end of that!

How many of *you* can just *sit*? In this crowd, many of us are happy to be *able* to sit, instead of always lying down! But that's not my point; are you one of those people who, no matter what, must to be *doing something*? We've talked about this before, but the great majority of Green Valley-ites that are still able to be active are busier now than before they retired. And that doesn't just mean that you're playing golf or bridge or water polo or volunteering with the Food Bank or at a school or with a service club; doing something that keeps you busy can also be making sure your car is just so, cleaning up before the cleaning lady comes, trimming the hedges before the landscaper arrives, re-
planning the layout of that house you just bought and are probably going to sell in a couple of years anyway. In other words, busyness. To put it bluntly, you just can't *be*, you've got to *be doing*.

The other day, Valerie and I were on our way out to lunch, and we both remarked how much spare time we had twenty years ago compared to now – with one of us already retired! My woodshop is still spread all over the garage; the trim still hasn't been finished in the rooms we redid two years ago. And we're both always on the go – I have to point out, right here, that it's not Sadie and Seth's fault, either. We've done it to ourselves. There's just so much to accomplish. And we both keep thinking of more to do!

But we – and maybe you, too – long for the opportunity to quietly take things in, or at least we talk about it: To smell the roses (even though we had them dug up). To sit at Jesus’ feet, and let those words of life sink in and take root. (An important aside: an awful lot of people – some scholars included – seem to think that Mary’s sitting there chatting with Jesus, and that’s part of what’s making Martha so upset. Actually, the text says quite clearly that Mary was *listening* to Jesus: nothing says she’s talking at all.) And the mere fact that these *women* are the center of the story, receive so much attention, and are the focus of Jesus’ direct teaching is hard to overstate. Women were simply *ignored* outside Jesus’ circle.

But the point is, sitting at the feet of Jesus, whether literally or spiritually, is what he wants us to be doing, right?

Well, yes; but maybe not quite just that way. You see, there’s two important points to be made about M&M: one, they are *both* serving, just in two very different ways. Mary is soaking up what she needs to be able to carry on the ministry that will soon fall on all Jesus’ followers after his death and resurrection; Martha is doing what the Law and good manners require, making sure all present are comfortable, given hospitality.

So, they’re both serving: one in anticipation, one right now.

Second, Jesus says that Mary’s “chosen the better part, and it won’t be taken from her.” Most of the time, we interpret those words to mean that *being*, just letting God wash over us, is better than running around doing stuff. That’s a false distinction, I believe. In fact, Jesus often chastises people for *not* doing, just being. In the verse right before the start of this story, at the end of a discussion of a legal point, Jesus tells a teacher of the Law to “Go *and do* likewise.”

It seems to me much more likely that with M&M Jesus was addressing this particular scene as it unfolded before him. Right now, at this moment, as Jesus is teaching, Mary’s part is the better one for what is to come; but someone still has to do the other part of the work, better or not at that moment.

We’d much rather be sitting in a nice comfy chair at a big desk in a beautiful office, making decisions others will carry out, than shoveling gravel or sweeping off a road after a monsoon storm; but they both have to be done. And while one may have more lasting value – that decision you make may change the world! – keeping that street clean and safe may keep someone alive to make those world-shaking decisions.

So, doing is as important as being, and vice-versa. They just have to be kept in balance.

Journalist Tom Friedman wrote once about a taxi ride from the Paris (as in France) airport into the city. Over the course of an hour,

between the driver and himself, they managed to squeeze in six different major activities: the cabbie drove, more or less; took calls on his cell phone; watched a video on the phone (not for the faint of heart, this cab-riding stuff). Friedman rode (in this case, a pretty exhausting task), wrote on his laptop, and listened to his iPod. Here's how he summed up the ride and his point:

“There was only one thing we never did: talk to each other.”

It was multitasking, getting things done, for sure; but both failed to relate to the human closest to them, the incarnate image of God just a few feet away. Where's the balance in that? All “in,” no “out,” like Martha's pleas that Mary was leaving everything to her, four times using “me” or “my,” instead of serving more wine, whining about her work load.

Perhaps this story of M&M is more than just a tale of two sisters and how they personify our different ways of addressing situations; perhaps it's a sort of signal from Jesus to focus on *him*, to give *him* some time in our busyness, some conversation, some concentrated, full attention, rather than letting him ride along in the back, comfy and undisturbed?

Now, Jesus calls us to focus on him here in worship, to put aside our distractions and worries and come back into contact with the give and take of doing and being, let ourselves connect with the source that

brings energy and peace to what we have to do. But even that's not clear-cut.

This story is one we live, and scenes like it were probably played out wherever Jesus stayed: some gathering to hear Jesus' teach, others taking care of hospitality. And it's the same here, in this place, as we serve the Church, the household of faith, our sisters and brothers gathered together. Some of us will be busy with the details of our common life, ushering, greeting, setting up fellowship, serving at VBS, counting money, organizing the pews, caring for those who are sick or unable to be here and so forth; others are occupied in study and prayer, worship, music, and sharing the good news, teaching and learning. We should, when we are able, be on both sides of this – or at least alternate!

The ultimate key is balance, doing when doing's right, being when being's right, and the ultimate arbiter of that balance is God. And, finally, we find that balance in our life in with and through Christ and the Holy Spirit. How is the Spirit working through you? Are you M, or M?