

In the 30<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, after he has given all the commandments and laws to the people, Moses says these words to them: “This commandment I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it far away. The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” Then he finishes up with a statement about the two ways that are set before the people: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, with obedience and holding fast to God, for that means life to you...”

This is a big idea that is contained in the scriptures – two paths before us, one the way of obedience to God, and the other a path that leads somewhere else – a path that leads us away from life and from God.

The Psalm for today is a cautionary poem about how a person of power and influence can lose his way, and if that is true for a person who is so public and before the sight of God – then it must be true for people like me and you.

It is interesting that Luke put the story of Jesus’ visit to the house of Mary and Martha right after the parable of the Good Samaritan. By doing

that Luke moves from a story about a person whose actions are important and life-saving, to a story about a woman whose actions are misplaced and awkward. Jesus really puts it to us to consider the two ways that are present for us. If we limit our attention just to the story of Mary and Martha, it seems like the two ways that lay before us are the way of action versus the way of listening.

A friend of mine has taken exception to this interpretation. She said that she has studied the passage many times and that spirituality is no excuse for laziness. No matter how well a person prays, or studies the Bible, or worships, spirituality is no reason to leave the sink full of dishes. There are things that simply have to get done. Parker Palmer, a Christian teacher has written a book about the active life, spiritual life that is within lives filled with doing things – that some people simply cannot sit quietly by the feet of the teacher and learn that way. They learn by doing. It is in the serving and the collaborating and common cause that Christ is revealed to these people. My friend who has taken exception to seeing this story as a very simple lesson of one thing is right and another is wrong happens to be named Martha – and at some point she was up to her neck with people

saying that they were “a Martha” or “a Mary”. She said – and I think she is right, it is not that simple.

The Good Samaritan’s motives seem pretty straight forward. He sees a man who is in trouble. The man needs help. The Samaritan sees that he can help. He can even take care of some of the man’s future needs. Jesus makes it clear that mercy is the motive of his actions. As Jesus puts it to the Pharisee who asked him “who is my neighbor”, Jesus does not say, “Go, be a Samaritan” he essentially says, “Go and show mercy.”

When it comes to the house of Martha, what is the motive for her actions? That is a good question for us as we ponder the many ways and paths that beckon us. What is our motive? What are we up to?

There is a great article on a parallel kind of subject in the latest issue of Christian Century magazine. Michael Lindvall writes about materialism. After many years as pastor in the Midwest he has for the last ten years served a church in New York City – in Manhattan. His church is located in the heart of the fashion district. Surrounded by a culture of excess and expensive fashion while living life with a variety of people in that setting, he has come to the conclusion that materialism – stuff – is not in and of

itself sinful. After all, he writes, God is the first materialist having made this world and all that is in it and saying over it all – “it is good.” Lindvall says that the way we often are with stuff does not reflect God’s concern for stuff; it is not that we like stuff too much, rather, he writes, it is that we do not like it enough. Or better, that we do not like it appropriately. We tend to get, and then tire of it, so that we replace rather than repair, we discard rather than cherish. The danger to our souls, he writes, is in the insatiable quest to acquire new things as if the getting of them can fill the emptiness.

What is it that Martha is after? We cannot know and even Jesus is not specific. What he can see is that there is an emptiness that Martha is trying to fill in a way that will never fill it. It is not that being focused on a task is wrong; or having a busy schedule is wrong; and certainly it is not wrong to want to serve and to be a servant – Jesus is the servant king; no, it is in what a person is after in their quest.

We live in a time of self-help. A study a year ago made a kind of sad joke about the Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus. If that is the goal, and anyone can attain that as a gift of free grace, then the church is irrelevant. The idea can be argued that all we need to know can

be found on the internet. We think we can shape our religious life on our own. We believe we can make our religious and spiritual self-fulfillment our own thing and so we may follow our quest, we think, until we are satisfied.

Is that what Jesus means for us? Doesn't Jesus hold out to us more than we may know we are to be looking for? Isn't there wonderful mystery in the person of Jesus as he is revealed to us, rather than as we seek Jesus out on our own terms? Martha turns to Jesus less it seems because she is jealous of the nature of Mary's relationship to Jesus, and more because Jesus does not seem interested in Martha's self-interested quest of self-fulfillment.

And Jesus is not. Jesus cares about you and Jesus cares about me. Jesus comes right into our life just as he came into Martha's house. In him is what all humankind needs to find our way – and to find our way together. Jesus does not reject Martha – he loves Martha – and Jesus does not reject her desire to serve – but in this house are two ways. One way leads to life and the other leads somewhere else. The joy that Martha may

find in serving will ultimately find fulfillment when her serving is focused outward and independent of Martha's self determined quest.

The Presbyterian Church USA has a new emphasis on evangelism, "Grow Christ's Church Deep and Wide", that has been around since our last General Assembly. It has been crowded out by our continuing wrangling over other issues. The General Assembly is re-emphasizing it. There is a great video that the program produced that tells of a church in Oklahoma, full of older people and no youth. There was a session meeting where the elders were kind of complaining that nothing they were doing was attracting young families and youth. While this was being worried over the meeting was disturbed by the sound of a skateboard grinding on a hand rail. A couple of elders went out to confront the hoodlums and the minister and a retired teacher and elder went with them. There, in the parking lot, were more than a dozen young people skate boarding and hanging out. As the minister and teacher stood looking out the door as the other elders went to talk to the skaters, the teacher said, "There are more youth in this parking lot right now than I have seen here in this church in the twenty years I have been a member."

Surely the session agenda called for other matters, the motive being to pay the bills, keep the lights on, keep up doing church until somebody walked in the door. But all those young people had suddenly struck them. What was Jesus saying to them now? What was their motive now? Survival? Or was Jesus calling them to take a risk on his love and his concern? Was Jesus calling them out to somewhere beyond their self-determination, their self-imposed limitations, beyond their self-satisfaction?

The video goes on to show how this congregation laid aside their agenda, and took the risk to listen to Jesus, and in time discovered in these young people whom they reached out to, a whole new shape of ministry that they never, in their wildest imagination, would have come up with on their own. No way.

Way. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, with obedience and holding fast to God, for that means life to you...”. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.”

The church is called to a life that rises up out of broad and risky obedience to the way of Christ. That means we cease being the carefully predictable and become the wondrously receptive community of the risen and living Lord. It means an end to that petulant worry and distraction of many things, and holding onto to that way which is life for us, the way of Jesus Christ. Amen.