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The Better Part

Luke 10:38-42
I Corinthians 12:27-31

I CORINTHIANS 12:27-31

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Let us continue our worship together in prayer: Nurturing Lord, open our ears to what you would have us hear and our eyes to the new things you are doing in our midst, so that we might see you at work in and through us. If these words are not your Word, may they be forgotten and come to naught, but if they be Thy Word, may they adhere to our hearts, forever transforming us from glory into glory, into the creatures you would have us be, though who art our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

LUKE 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, (Jesus) entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

The word of the Lord...

Over the Fourth of July weekend my sister and her family flew down, we all packed into the mini-van, and headed down to Roanoke, Virginia for a family reunion. At this point there are only three generations involved in this thing, all stemming from four brothers – my generations' grandfathers. When we were kids the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving were often times that everyone got together, but it had been awhile since this large crowd had all been in the same place at the same time.

It was fun to connect with some of my cousins on an adult level, watching as our kids echoed our personalities for better or for worse. One cousin I was particularly grateful to reconnect with is Alison. She and I both played the tomboy role in our respective families growing up, and the worst part for both of our mothers at Thanksgiving was getting the two of us from our play clothes to our dress-up dinner cloths (that is a story for another day).

You would think that there might be a rivalry between us, but truth is there is no contest. Alison is a better, more graceful athlete than I am and she is also beyond smarter than I am. She turned down a full scholarship to MIT because Cornell had a better aeronautical engineering program. At her current place of employment she is nearly finished with their latest project... the replacement to the Hubble telescope. And when I sent out the invitations to my Installation to the position of Head of Staff at Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church, her mother – a fellow Presbyterian – called elated for me and then let it slip, “Alison just turned down NASA.”

The thing is though, when your 2 year old is throwing a hissy fit because your 6 year old stole his pool goggles and then whacked him over the head with them... none of that matters. In that moment, the better part is ‘Mom’.

Every three years this lectionary text from Luke comes around and I have to wonder just how many sermons – including those previously done by me – have been crafted around the contemplativeness of Mary vs. the busyness of Martha.

Stories and parables are used in an overall narrative to make a particular point, they are not the full picture. Judging Martha in this context alone would be like going to the Louvre Museum and focusing intently on only the lower right hand corner of the *Mona Lisa*.

“Undoubtedly in the close friendship of Jesus with this family there were *other* occasions when Martha was praised for her caring deed and Mary gently chided for her ease and chatter. Different occasions call for different emphases.”¹ God did not create us to be one streamlined personality. One expression of discipleship does not take precedence over another.

Some of you may recall that Martha and Mary had a brother named Lazarus. The Gospel of John tells the story of when Lazarus became sick and it was only after he died that Jesus arrived. When the family heard Jesus was finally on his way, it was Martha – not Mary – who went out to meet him:

Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' – John 11:21-27

Different occasions call for different gifts. In John, Martha’s clarity gives us a better understanding of the scene in Mark. It is not that one form of devotion is better than another. What is important is the object of devotion. To focus on the gift of the grace is the better part.

Our denomination's General Assembly met during the first full week of July. I watched a few portions of it on a live feed through the computer. By sheer coincidence I managed to catch the debate surrounding a few of the issues that tend to draw deep lines in the sand. The secular media picked up on a few of them and to just read the scrawl at the bottom of a news channel, you would think all we did was disagree with each other. I think that is how secular media likes to portray us quaint, church-going folk – as argumentative, and full of rancor and mistrust.

Of course, you and I know, nothing could be further from the church. And with only a few exceptions, I would say that most churches are like us. We know about these issues swirling out there, but it isn't our main meal in here. In here, we're busy talking about and working mission trips to Krislund, Canada and West Virginia. We're delivering things to New Hope and walking for CROSS, gathering in Sunday school and preparing for the next community dinner. We're talking about the new members that have been welcomed and just how comfortable the new chairs that have been ordered are going to be.

Most of what we are about has nothing to do with liberal and conservative. I read a story in the news about four Presbyterian hikers on the Appalachian trail. They encountered a woman with a broken arm. They cared for her, got her to a shelter, contacted rangers, and made sure, over a 36 hour period that she stayed warm and dry and nourished enough to make it until she could be transported off of the trail.ⁱⁱ Do you think they asked for her views on immigration before they helped her? Do you think she asked their opinion on ordination standards before she would accept their help? Of course not. 90% of what we do as Christians has nothing to do with the controversies or disagreements in our midst.

The thing is, we may not talk about them every week, but here at MPC, just as in the church at large, we are a congregation that is not of one mind about some of these big issues. And because we genuinely love and care for each other, sometimes we tiptoe around politics or big issues facing our country for fear we will damage these very important relationships.

90% of what the church is about, disagreements don't even enter into the equation. But how we handle that other 10% matters. Because the world is watching us, and how we disagree matters. If we ignore those places where we disagree, we teach the world that it is okay to sweep your problems under the rug. If we get caught up and all-consumed by our disagreements, we teach that the messages of Jesus - compassion and justice - are secondary.

If, on the other hand, we learn how to disagree, then we teach the world that peace is possible. True peace - the agreement to respect each other's God given humanity at a global level.

Last Sunday the topics in the sermon were immigration and mercy. I received a lot of feedback, both positive and negative, and for those conversations I am thankful. I have preached about a year and a half's worth of sermons here already and my hope is to preach plenty more, chances are you are not going to agree with everything I say. And that's great! One of the tenants of our faith is that God has given us a mind that we are to use to engage

with this world and that includes bringing it with us when we walk through the Sanctuary doors.

Just like the family of Mary and Martha, on a much larger scale, we are part of a family. And families aren't formed because of agreement, they are formed out of love. We don't have to be afraid of damaging these relationships we just have to learn how to disagree. We have to learn how to trust one another, and embrace our commonalities so completely that we can deal with those places where we don't hold a common opinion. That's the gift of the Holy Spirit, that we can trust the Spirit for our Unity.

One of the emails I received this past week summed up this spirit of unity so well that I requested to use it this morning. "Even if we should end up disagreeing with one another, we are still united, just not uniform in our understandings."

I give thanks for the diversity of opinion in our midst and both the accountability and the welcome that provides. Yes, diversity and even disagreement can mean welcome because it means that no matter who walks in these doors, there is a place for them.

On the night of his betrayal, the Lord Jesus Christ took the bread and after he had blessed it, he gave it to his disciples... all of them: the fishermen, the tax collectors, the academics, the blue collar, even the betrayer.

On that day and now, we come together in common faith, not a common opinion. Liberal democrats, conservative republicans, and the moderates who outnumber us all. Before we are any of these things, we are Christians.... And that is the better part.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Douglas John Hall. *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 3*, Bartlett and Taylor, eds. Theological Perspective. p. 266.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2005/05244.htm>