

Luke 10:25-37, 38-42
Going With God: A Three Sermon Series
Part 1: "What is the 'Better Part'?"
June 10, 2018 ~ Service of Ordination and Installation
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Introduction:

This story follows directly on the heels of our first lesson, which ended with, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan." The next verse begins with this phrase, "Now as they went on their way." Where are they going? In Luke's narrative world, a significant turn occurred in chapter 9 verse 51, where we are told, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Both of these stories occur after this turn toward Jerusalem. With his face set to go to the cross, Jesus' time to teach his disciples how to "Go with God" is growing short. In our first lesson, Jesus tells the lawyer, "Go and do likewise." To Martha, in the story you are about to hear, he will tell her something quite different.

Sermon:

How many miles have you driven in one day? One summer I drove 1,037 miles in one day, with our younger daughter Hannah before she was old enough to help with the driving. The two of us woke up in Chamberlain, South Dakota (which is on the western side of that rather wide state) and went to bed that night at home in Springfield, Ohio. I started driving at 6:00 am, stopped just once for about an hour at 6:00 pm, and rolled into our driveway at 10:30 p.m. We had to get home that night and so we did.

In a way, it was a huge challenge—kind of like running a marathon, minus the sweat and blisters. Cruise control helped, and I had to exercise my fingers from time to time. It was a physical and mental workout of a sort. When I started I wasn't sure I could do it.

But in another way, the day was easy because we had just one clear goal: to make the miles and get home. The first day of our three-day drive home, we visited friends in Missoula, toured Yellowstone Park, waited for Old Faithful (but it took too long) and hiked in the Grand Tetons. The second day we stopped at Mt. Rushmore and toured the towering sculptures of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt. We mixed miles with sightseeing. But on the third day we just drove. We knew we had "need of only one thing." Our goal was absolutely clear, we knew what we had to do. And did it.

You may recall or you may currently be in a time in your life when you have either something very wonderful or very difficult to accomplish in short order. In either situation, when you are in that crunch time—you are forced to have tremendous clarity of purpose. Your priority is set, and you know exactly what road God is calling you to take. Everything else must wait.

Most of our days are not like that. We wake up with too many things on our minds that we need to do, could do, want to do. We get anxious, distracted and we wonder: what are the most important things I should be doing today? How will I get it all done? Most of us just try to run faster, sleep less, and double down on our multi-tasking. We resent those who seem to drive too slowly or just don't prioritize things the way we do. Something like the way Martha resents Mary in our story. Did you notice how she tries to get Jesus to do something about that lazy, slacker Mary? "Lord, tell her to help me."

But Jesus does *not* do what Martha wants him to. He does not tell Mary to get in the kitchen and start helping Martha. Instead he lovingly chides Martha for failing to see what was most important at that moment. Martha's first instinct was a good one—she had invited and welcomed Jesus as a guest into their home. But then she let her worry over the "many things" involved in hosting a guest properly get the better of her. They had become "distractions," as Jesus called them. And instead he pointed out that it was actually Mary who had chosen "the better part."

Really? But who's going to get dinner on the table? Luke doesn't spell out what Jesus meant exactly; instead he leaves it up to us to do some interpreting. Did Jesus mean that Mary was very clever at getting out of the dishes? Perhaps we have here a clear scriptural warrant for all dish washing slackers: now you can quote Luke 10:42 as your justification for staying out of the kitchen all together. Is that it? Probably not. What I do hear in Jesus' response is the way he takes the exasperation and frustration of Martha and turns it into a teaching moment. I hear Jesus pointing out the trap, yes I will call it a sin, that Martha and many of us and commit in the name of "doing our duty." When our busyness eclipses our ability to listen and reset our agenda according to Jesus: the One whom we are called to love and serve above all else, we are sinning. Why? Because this kind of doing diverts, distracts, and can even derail us from loving God with all our heart and soul, our strength and mind.

Looking at our two scripture lessons stories side-by-side as a diptych, you will notice that Jesus says something quite different to the lawyer than he does to Martha. Both are like good church people, trying to do the right thing. The lawyer was a rule follower—but whose rules was he really following? Martha was a gracious host, but whom was she really trying to please? The lawyer set out to test Jesus and then justify himself. Martha tried to triangulate Jesus to help her guilt Mary into gear. But rather than calling either of them out on their self-serving agendas, Jesus respond with compassion and challenge, cutting to the core of what's at stake for both of them.

First, let's look at the lawyer who stood up to test Jesus. This lawyer, is full of head knowledge, and knows the law backward and forward—His problem is *overthinking* and *underdoing*. The lawyer wants to use his knowledge to follow the letter of the law, but not to go one inch further. He wants to "justify" himself and know he's done what is required. It appears that God's law of love that knows no boundaries, has not descended into the lawyer's heart or hands or feet. And so Jesus

tells the lawyer: “Go and do likewise.” That is, “Go and be like the Samaritan in my parable, let compassion spur you into neighborly action that knows no bounds.”

Now, let’s look at the second picture in this diptych, our hostess, Martha, who welcomes Jesus into her home. Martha is already all action. She has busy hands and feet. Jesus doesn’t need to tell her to “go and do”—she wakes up running. In the Gospel of John’s story about the raising of Lazarus, you may recall that here too, she’s the one who runs out to get Jesus first. Mary follows, later. Jesus can see that Martha’s busyness in today’s story has cut off her heart, her compassion, and her ability to prioritize and do first things first. Martha’s obsessive “do-do-do” mind has pushed her over into being resentful, bitter, and judgmental of her sister, Mary. And so Jesus tells her, basically, “Martha, Martha, take a page from your sister’s book, sit, be still, and listen.”

Yes: it’s a both/and. The better part, the laser focus Jesus is teaching us about here, whether we wake up to a day with just one task, like driving over a thousand miles, or fifty-one tasks and obligations, the better part is always: to choose to “Go with God.” When we wake up, we have no idea what the day will hold: whether we will fall off a ladder headfirst or we will meet the love of our life and fall in love, heart first. We don’t know. But we do know that whatever may happen, we *can* choose the “better part” which is always, always to “Go with God.” This is easier said than done, whether we’re talking about our individual lives or our life as a church body. That’s why we will be thinking about what “Going with God” entails in a three-sermon series.

For today, we see Jesus challenging the lawyer and Martha to “go beyond the mind they have,” one of author, theologian Marcus Borg’s definitions for “repent.” In this diptych, we see Jesus stretching two people who are very sure of themselves, to loosen their grip and widen the lens through which they see themselves and others. With the lawyer, Jesus shocks the law abiding lawyer by making the despised foreigner, the Samaritan to be the hero, the model of loving neighbor—rather than the priest or the Levite, the ones who are *supposed* to be the models of “going with God.”

With Martha, Jesus shocks her, by affirming Mary’s radical decision to sit at the Lord’s feet. This was explicitly the posture that only male disciples were supposed to take. This was no place for a Jewish woman of Jesus’ day. Part of Martha’s outrage was telling Jesus to get Mary off her high horse and to behave more properly, more appropriately, to stay in role. And yet instead, Jesus affirmed Mary as the one who had chosen the better part. Mary was the one who was making the most out of Jesus’ visit. Out of bounds Mary, and the despised Samaritan are Jesus’ role models for us today.

As we get ready to ordain and install our church officers, we do not know what will happen in our world or nation or in Marshfield, or here at FPC during these next three years, during the watch of this class of 2021. I do know that they

are committed to “going with God” as we learn together what that means: what projects, ministries, spiritual growth, and outreach Jesus will lead us to do.

Let’s face it: We are living in a time of crisis. 23 church leaders from across the ecumenical spectrum in May, at the beginning of our Pentecost season, under the banner, “Reclaiming Jesus” wrote “A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis” which proclaims: “It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography. Our identity in Christ precedes every other identity.”ⁱThe church’s role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. Increasing economic disparity, political polarization and climate change threaten our wellbeing if not our very existence, as we know it. The stakes to “Go and do likewise” could not be higher; the call to choose “the better part,” cannot be clearer.

Particularly for us today as a church, I hear Jesus calling us to resist the temptation to self-justify (“yes, we are following all the rules just fine”) and the temptation to let ourselves be distracted (“but there are so many good things we could and should be doing”). We can help each other choose the better part. Next Sunday we will get another lesson from Teacher Jesus on how to do this. Today, let us pray for our Ruling Elders and Deacons as they lead us to choose the better part, listening with all their might and muster to the Holy Spirit.

For now, let us do our best to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen the Christ calling to us as we sing together, “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me,” and let’s choose the better part.

ⁱ ReclaimingJesus.org, “A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis”