

The Grace Of Not Doing

Luke 10:38-42

July 22, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

Just when you think you've got Jesus all figured out, he surprises you. Last week, we heard Jesus tell us a story about a man who came across someone in need. He helped that person in need, making sacrifices of his time and money. And Jesus said to us, "Go and do likewise."

I am guessing that is what many of you have done this week: you have gone and done. I know, for example, that many of you did what was necessary to make Vacation Bible School happen here at Augusta Road. I know because I watched you scurrying around this place – preparing food, shuttling supplies, teaching lessons, transporting children. You did a lot for the kingdom of God this week. Others of you did other things that may have been less obvious but just as important for the cause of Christ. You visited the sick, or carried a meal to a neighbor, or prepared a Sunday School lesson, or called to check on a family member in need. And still others of you did that really unglamorous thing of getting up and going to work each day so that you could earn a paycheck to support a family and put a tithe in the offering plate. Well done, good and faithful servants. You went and did, just like Jesus asked you to do.

But then we come here today and Jesus turns the table on us. Instead of commending us for our ceaseless doing on his behalf, he rebukes us for being too busy and tells us we need to sit down and be quiet. What gives?

It might help to make a little sense out of this apparent contradiction if we consider where Jesus is in the story before us today. In one sense, that is obvious enough: Jesus is in the home of Martha who, along with her sister Mary, is hosting him and his disciples for dinner. But we also need to think about where He is in the bigger story that the gospel writer tells.

To do that, we need to keep in mind that while each of the gospel writers tells the same story, each one does it in a slightly different way. Among the several unique qualities of Luke's account is that He has arranged his material as a sort of travelogue. All the gospel writers tell us that Jesus went to Jerusalem, but Luke makes special use of that fact as a way of building suspense. With each step along the way, with each conversation that is had, with each episode that is reported, Jesus is getting closer to his final destination. The tension is building; the drama is mounting; the storm clouds are gathering. *That* is what brings Jesus to dinner at the home of

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Martha on this night. “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village,” Luke says. As he was on his way where? On his way to Jerusalem. To die.

Have you ever been around someone who is close to death? I remember the first time I, as a pastor, was called on to minister to a dying man. The doctors said it was only a matter of weeks. Over and again, I would gather with his family around his bedside watching him sink further and further into unconsciousness, wondering if each breath he took would be his last. Thinking back I am struck but how little I said in those moments. I, who make my living by putting words together, was speechless. I mostly just stood, sometimes holding hands with a family member, sometimes just staring out the window searching for something in the landscape to distract myself from the mystery of death before me. That’s what mystery does to you. It makes you sit and be quiet.

Which is what Mary, the sister, chooses to do. Here, face-to-face with the mystery of the Incarnation, in the very presence God in the flesh in her own living room, before the One who is about to lay down his life for the sins of the world, Mary sits in quiet adoration. Meanwhile, her sister Martha is busy making preparations. There is food to cook and a table to set. Hosting a dinner party for 13 hungry guests is no small task to undertake. But Mary concerns herself with other thing. Tonight, as Jesus is on his way to death, it is better to sit and listen.

That’s the challenge, isn’t it – knowing when is the right time for the right response? Timing, as they say, is everything. The Bible says that there is a time for every activity under heaven, and there is a time for the exact opposite activity. There is a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time for war and a time for peace, a time to keep and a time to throw away. And apparently, if Jesus’ words and actions are authoritative for us, there is a time for going and doing, and there is a time for sitting and listening. And the real mark of wisdom is not found in simply knowing how to do any of these things; it is in knowing *when* to do them. There is a time to be busy with the tasks at hand, and there is a time to be still and know that God is God, and wise is he who knows the difference.

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One Friday evening a few weeks ago we came home from work and set about doing the things that we do at our home on weekends. It's the usual stuff: a yard to mow, laundry to wash, several home improvement projects at various stages of incompleteness. As I passed through the family room moving from one task to the next, Ashlyn, our four-year-old was playing a new game she had just invented. She had managed to talk her mother into playing this new game with her, and now she wanted me to join in on the fun. I thanked her for the invitation and then assured her that I was much too busy for any such trivialities at the moment. That's when Heather looked at me with that look that only your wife can give you. You know the look I am talking about. It's the one that's even worse than the look that your mother gave you when you were a child right before she lowered the boom on you. She said, "Chris, you don't have anything more important to be doing right now. Stop and play with your daughter." Her words stung the way only true words can sting. She was right, here was a moment I was in danger of missing, a moment of child-like wonderment, a moment of connection with my own flesh and blood, because I was too busy to sit and be still.

Of course, the challenge here is that those tasks we were busy doing were necessary tasks. The laundry does have to be washed and the repairs do have to be made. We don't have the luxury of just not doing such things. That's why we need the wisdom to know when.

That's also why we have to be careful in how we read this story in Luke 10. There may be a tendency to oversimplify things and take Martha as the clear villain and Mary as the unqualified hero. A dear friend in our former church used to tell me that she really didn't care for this story. This friend is your classic type A personality - very organized, efficient, and busy, both in the church and in the community. "It just seems so unfair to Martha," she used to tell me. "After all, somebody has to get in the kitchen and get supper going." She was right. The thing about this story that makes it so relevant to us is that both Martha and Mary were showing hospitality to Jesus. They were both welcoming him into their home. It's not that what Martha was doing was wrong. Preparing food for another is one of the greatest acts of self-giving one can show. It's just that Mary seemed to be more tuned in to the appropriateness of this moment as a moment to sit and listen. She had the vision to see past the immediate demands of the

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situation and recognize that here and now, as Jesus was moving towards his death, it was time to sit and listen to what he had to say.

The challenge of the Christian life is that it is at one and the same time a life of both action and reflection. Jesus calls us out into the world to do the things he has asked us to do: to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the prisoner, to preach the gospel, to make disciples. We cannot be faithful disciples by hiding always behind the safe walls of this sanctuary.

Clarence Jordan was the author of the Cotton Patch Gospel and the founder of Koinonia Farms, an interracial Christian community in Americus, GA in the 1960's. It was at Koinonia that a guy named Millard Fuller heard the call to found something called Habitat for Humanity. At any rate, Clarence Jordan once said in his classic southern colloquial way that everybody wants to worship the hind legs off of Jesus, but nobody wants to do what he asks. The Christian life is a life of action, a life of going and doing what Jesus told us to go and do.

But the call to go and do must never be divorced from the call to sit and listen. If we do not sit at the feet of Jesus often enough and long enough to hear him and adore him, then all our activism will become nothing more than another idol for us. Our culture worships busyness, because we think being busy is a sign of being important. The late spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once asked, "Why is it that we think stealing five minutes from a busy person is worth more than those same five minutes from someone who is not busy?" Could it be that we, like the lawyer in last week's reading from the parable of the Good Samaritan, still want to justify ourselves by proving how much we can do?

The gospels portray Jesus as a very busy person. He was always on the go – preaching, healing, traveling. Demands pressed in on him from every side. And yet consider how often we read about him drawing away from the crowd to pray. Jesus' doing was not the result of some religious obsession that arose from within him; it was the result of his faithful response to the word of the Father, a response hammered out in those sometimes refreshing and sometimes difficult moments of prayer and reflection, like, say when he spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness. That's not a very efficient way to use time if one is only concerned with getting things done. I believe that it was not in spite of his busyness, but rather because of it that Jesus

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found it so necessary to build into his life times of solitude alone with God. Jesus knew how strong the temptation would be to define his life on his terms, or on the terms of those around him who made constant demands on him. For his mission in the world to be successful, he had to stay grounded in his Father's vision for his life, and that meant taking the time to see that vision.

If it was true of our Lord, then it is the ultimate form of arrogance for us to assume that it will not be true for us. We must stay grounded in God's vision of life, or else we will spend our lives chasing that every changing goal of human success. If we are not careful, we will fall into that trap of defining our lives on the terms of what we can accomplish, instead of recognizing that our lives have meaning only because of what God in Christ has already accomplished on our behalf.

But don't be fooled. Staying grounded in God's vision for our lives won't be easy. Our culture today has no shortage of opportunities to go and do. What are desperately lacking are opportunities for silence and reflection – time for simply being with God. Our lives are so saturated with entertainment and stimulation that we will have to work very hard to build in the kind of Mary moments that Jesus tells us we need. Such moments won't happen by accident or by coincidence. They will only happen if we commit ourselves to carving out times for silence, for prayer, for reading and reflecting upon Scripture, time for worshiping the Triune God, time for doing nothing but adoring Jesus. I'll admit that taking time out our busyness just to be with God may be the most awkward thing we will ever do. But, if Jesus' testimony is to be believed, it may be the one and only thing we truly need.

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