



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

6th Sunday after Pentecost: July 21, 2019

Sermon Title: “Hearts Set on Jesus”

Gospel Text: Luke 10:38-42

This is one of those Gospel readings that inevitably upsets at least a few people. Jesus’s correction of Martha feels very personal, almost like an attack on people who work hard and give their all. It feels unfair and impractical. It’s fine for Jesus and Mary to be sitting there, prayerfully gazing into nothingness, but when everyone’s hungry and needs to eat, where’s the food coming from? It won’t magically prepare itself. Mary and Jesus will be glad someone like Martha was working so hard, right?

After all, what kind of world would this be if we all stopped working and striving and serving and just sat around all day? Is that what Jesus really wants – a world where nothing gets done? Is Jesus really proposing a world where no one works, a world where the garbage piles up, the children aren’t fed, no homes are built, no sick patients are treated, no cars are repaired, and no yards are mowed? So what’s Jesus really saying when he compliments Mary by saying “she has chosen the better part”?

As you can guess, the answer is more complicated than a superficial reading of our Gospel lesson suggests. *I do not* believe that Jesus is unconditionally condemning work or effort or hospitality. In fact, there’s a long Biblical tradition that speaks very positively about work, effort, and hospitality. For example, take our lesson from Genesis. It’s a story of three strangers who show up at Abraham’s home. Abraham, his wife, and their servants work like crazy preparing a meal for these strangers. Theologians over the centuries have interpreted this story as a pre-Christian encounter between Abraham and the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We’ll leave the Trinitarian theology for another day. The essential point is this: Abraham frantically worked to serve the Triune God, and God did not utter a single word of criticism against him for all the foot washing, baking, cooking, and cattle slaughtering he, his family, and his servants did. So what’s the difference between what *he* did and what poor *Martha* did?

I thought a lot about these questions when I was away recently, on retreat in Kentucky at the Abbey of Gethsemani. For those of you who are avid readers, that’s the monastery where the writer Thomas Merton lived and wrote all of his wonderful books in the 50s and 60s. The Abbey is a community of Cistercian monks and a branch of the Benedictine religious order that’s among the world’s most austere religious communities. This group gathers for worship *seven* different times *every day*. The first service begins at 3:15 am and the last one wraps up at about 8 pm.

It's a grueling schedule. But for a week, I found it to be absolutely refreshing. I sampled all of the prayer services except for one; I confess that despite my best intentions, I never made it to the Vigils service at 3:15 am. This was a silent retreat, so aside from the singing and chanting of the psalms in worship, there was blessed quiet across the Abbey grounds. Even our meals were taken in silence. At first it felt like an *indulgent luxury* to be able to spend so much of my day in worship, slowly and contemplatively praying and chanting the psalms with this incredible community. But it didn't take long before it felt like a *necessity* to be able to be there, praying and sitting at the feet of Jesus.

And yet it's clear that work was taking place. I could pray because staff prepared our meals. I could pray because when worship wasn't taking place, the monks all had jobs to do. Some washed the dishes. Others baked bread. The Abbot administered a thousand different details. Other monks prepared talks for the visitors, wrote books, kept the Abbey's library in good order, and worked in the various businesses that brought revenue to the Abbey, including managing their bookstore and making their world-famous bourbon fruitcakes and bourbon fudge (it *is* Kentucky!).

And so even *this place* so steeped in sacredness and silence – *this community* of Cistercian monks – recognized the need for work. Not even *they* had the extravagance of being able to sit around all day just gazing at Jesus. Work had to be done. So was Jesus off his rocker when he corrected Mary? Or have the Cistercians, like most of us, just decided to ignore these verses as hopelessly impractical?

Well, Jesus was *not* off his rocker, and to live a normal, fulfilling life you do *not* have to ignore today's Gospel. Jesus isn't forcing us to choose between a frantic life of busyness, as exemplified by Martha, or a slow and quiet contemplative life, as exemplified by Mary. It wasn't Martha's busyness that was the problem. It was that she allowed it to *distract* her from Jesus and *pull her away* from Jesus. And so Jesus calls us to keep our hearts set upon him in everything we do, every hour of every day. Whether we're making a meal, mowing the grass, or sitting in worship, Jesus wants to be at the center of every aspect of our life.

Sometimes that's pretty simple. When we're at prayer at home, or when we're here in worship, I think we instinctively know that it's not time to be looking at Facebook on your phone, having a conversation, or reading a book. Like Mary, we are privileged during prayer and worship to be sitting at the feet of Jesus. He wants to love us and bless us, and invites us to love him back by giving him our undivided attention, our gaze, and our hearts.

But what about when we're working? We have to work, right? Of course we do. Here is where my Cistercian brothers are a big help to me. Their way of life is governed by a sixth century rule called the Rule of Benedict. Despite its antiquity, it remains to this day a valued and practical guide to the Christian life. One part of that Rule says, "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ." Isn't that beautiful? When you see someone – whether it's your best friend in the world or a complete stranger – Christ is in that person. What would it look like to treat that person the way you would treat Jesus? It seems to me that this is one of the ways Jesus is inviting us to *actively* live in community while keeping him at the center of everything we're doing.

Another part of the Benedictine rule I love provides that the person in charge of the monastery's property should "regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as the sacred vessels of the altar." In other words, regard everything we *do* as *holy work*, and all the things we *use* and *possess* in that work as *sacred items*. Cutting the grass can be holy work when it's done with love of Jesus. Making a sandwich can be holy work when it's done with love of Jesus. Your profession, your hobbies, and everything that fills your hours can also be filled with holiness. You don't even have to mention Jesus while you're doing it. Just recognize that whatever you're doing is an *expression of your faith*, and *integrated into your identity* as a beloved child of God. As Christians we don't live compartmentalized lives.

Friends, loving Jesus doesn't require that we give up our jobs or stop working. It doesn't mean we have to sit all day and stare at a painting of Jesus. It means that in everything we do, we do it in loving response to Jesus. And in everyone we meet, we love them like we would love Jesus. What differentiated Martha and Mary that day was not the state of their activity. It was the state of their hearts. *Jesus loves you*, and the only desire he has in the entire world is that you share that love with *him* and with *his children*. So whether you're sitting still or dashing about frantically working, do it with your heart set on Jesus. It'll change the way you approach your day. It might even change our world. Amen.