

THE BETTER CHOICE

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 10:38-42

July 21, 2019

What I'm going to ask you to do right now is probably contrary to my weekly goal of keeping your heart and mind focused on worship and God while you are here. But hopefully, this distracting thing I want you to do will make an important point.

For those of you who use the calendar on your cellphone to remind you of important appointments and activities, I invite you to take out your phone so that you can look at your schedule for the week ahead. If some of you carry a paper calendar feel free to grab that if it's in a purse or pocket. I want us to make a list of our typical scheduled as well as unscheduled activities for this coming week. I'll start us off with some basic activities: Sleep, Prepare/eat/cleanup meals, do laundry, clean house, go to work, grocery shop, watch favorite TV shows/sport games... What are some of your additional unscheduled or scheduled activities this coming week? (Doctor/dentist appointments, cut grass, weed/trim yard/garden, reading a book, eating at a restaurant, watching a movie at the theater, swimming/playing at the pool, boating on the lake, fishing, a summer cookout/picnic with friend/family, playing golf, running/walking/physical exercise, weekend camping, a summer vacation...)

Certainly the specifics of our daily chores, routines, and appointments vary from individual to individual, but we all have our list. Some of our activities like sleeping and eating are very basic human survival activities and ones in which we all engage even if differently. Some of our activities simply reflect what it means to live in and care for any type of living space like a house or an apartment. Some of our activities are very individualistic because they are based on personal interests and hobbies. Much of the time, our specific activities bring a sense of order to our lives as well as to the lives of others like family members and co-workers. But what might happen if we chose to ignore for a particular day, week, month, life time some of the items on our typical list? The result may well be noticeable disorder and pushback from others.

This is exactly what we see happening in today's Gospel lesson when Jesus visits in the home of Martha and Mary. In the first century, the duty of a Jewish woman was very clear. Women were to care for children and to do household chores. Martha and Mary both knew this. But when Jesus and his disciples stop for a visit, it is Martha alone who straightens up the house, prepares a meal, and generally attends to the needs of her guests. She busies herself being the perfect hostess, because this is her duty and she embraces it.

But instead of helping her sister and doing her duty, Mary plops herself down at Jesus' feet so that she may hear everything Jesus has to say. By doing this, Mary is literally behaving like a man – she is taking the place of a disciple. For that day and age, Mary is violating crystal-clear social boundaries and therefore bringing shame upon her house. By shirking her hostess responsibilities Mary is completely ignoring norms. Martha interprets Mary's lack of help as laziness and irresponsibility. I guess it's inevitable that hard workers are never pleased with those who appear to be slackers.

Anyone who has ever entertained others in their home whether it's a big graduation party or a casual summer picnic with a few friends knows that it takes planning, cleaning, preparation – it takes work. Personally, I'm glad we have Martha's in this church when it's time for a program like Vacation Bible School, when it's time

to take Communion to our shut-ins or to pull-off a congregational meal like the picnic in the park in August or SuperBowl Sundae in February. Workers are absolutely essential to the success of church ministries, programs and events. And yet, we know how our Bible story ends. When Martha asks Jesus to put Mary in her place, Jesus says, "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" (Lk 10:40-42).

These words from Jesus might seem fine on a Sunday morning as we are gathered at the feet of Jesus to listen to God's word, but they're harder to swallow most days because Martha is the one we are more likely to emulate and honor in our day-to-day lives. Let's face it, not only do we each have our own list of daily chores and activities, we also mostly like being neat and organized. We feel embarrassed if someone stops by our house and it's a mess. We feel a bit guilty if our closets are crammed full of clothes, and our garages and basements are packed with tools, toys, sports equipment and boxes of who-knows what. Now some of us may be more tidy and organized than others; and if I asked several of you, I may get different definitions of what is messy. And yet, wherever your definition lies, I think most people do not enjoy living in the midst of what they consider a mess.

The reason I feel confident saying this is because home cleaning products and home-organizing products are huge business in our society. As industries they account for billions of dollars of sales every year – that's a lot of brooms, vacuums, mops, sponges, soap, cleanser, files, plastic tubs, and closet organizing systems. As a whole, we Americans take cleanliness and organization very seriously.

But there is a problem here, because in the midst of our daily schedule of activities, the checking off our "to-do" lists, organizing our messiness, and spending so much time cleaning and cooking that we don't have time to even visit with our guests, we hear Jesus speaking to us. Here in the midst of summer, Jesus challenges us to seriously consider our daily activities, and whether our daily choices and priorities and overall laboring are getting in the way of our faithful listening. Perhaps we need to consider the fact that a life set on accomplishing both what others expect of us and what we expect of ourselves, is not necessarily all that it's cracked up to be. Sometimes, it's the shirking of a responsibility or two for the right reasons that is the better choice, the one that produces the greater blessing.

According to Jesus, Mary is the one who has her priorities straight. Ignoring other tasks for the opportunity to sit with and listen to Jesus is the better choice. By doing this Mary's life reflects the correct answer to the question voiced just a few verses earlier in chapter 10 of Luke when Jesus was asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (vs. 25) The correct response was "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Lk 10:27)

Immediately following the declaration of the Great Commandment, Jesus shares the parable of the Good Samaritan to emphasize what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. And then, along comes Mary, who clearly shows what it looks like to love the Lord her God with all her heart, all her soul, all her strength, and all her mind. Mary's love for God is demonstrated as she sets aside duty so that she may instead sit with Jesus and give her full attention to what Jesus was saying.

Martha, on the other hand, is so caught up in, distracted by her work that she is unable to hear the word of God. In fact, she literally separates herself from God's word by placing herself in a totally different place, a separate room than the room in

which God's word is being spoken. Just a couple of chapters earlier in the Gospel of Luke, we heard about a seed – representing the word of God and falling among thorns. In that case, the fruit of the seed cannot mature, because the thorny people are preoccupied with “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” (8:14). Poor Martha, as hard-working as she is, as good-hearted, conscientious and well-intentioned as she is, she is that thorny ground. Yes, she is fulfilling her societal duties, her household obligations, but all those responsibilities have prevented her from hearing God's word. Martha has failed to make the better choice.

But Mary understands that a person “Does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Lk 4:4). Like Jesus' disciples, she is willing to turn her back on other responsibilities to follow Jesus (Lk 5:11). Like the good soil in the parable of the seed, she hears the word, embraces it, and is ready to bear fruit (Lk 8:15). Mary's bedroom and closet may be messier and others may be whispering behind her back for not doing everything they think she should be doing, but Mary has made room in her life for Jesus. Mary made the better choice. She has “chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Lk 10:42)

Mary is like the teenager who skips a high-school dance to go on a church retreat. She's like the man who takes a week off from work to attend a conference on spiritual growth. She's like the woman who devotes an hour every week to leading a Bible study at a local assisted living facility or homeless shelter. She's like the church member who cannot afford the time and money to go on both a vacation and a mission trip, and who chooses the mission trip. She's like the family that is committed to being in worship on Sunday morning – even on a Sunday like today in the middle of the summer, because it is here that time is set aside to sit with Jesus and to hear God's word. She is like the individual believer who despite the many daily distractions and long “to-do” list always makes time to be with Jesus.

These faith-building, biblical priorities are critically important but they're maintained at a cost. Just as Mary shattered social expectations and was probably the topic of community gossip for days, those who choose to focus on God's word may also find ourselves facing some messes. The teenager who chooses a church retreat over a high-school dance may be lumped together with other Christians in a derogatory way. The man who takes a week off from work for a spiritual conference or mission trip may lose some income or have less vacation time to do other activities. The woman who attends or leads a weekly Bible study won't have quite as much time to accomplish other tasks. And the family that regularly attends worship will likely spend just a little less time at the lake, the beach, the campground, or simply in bed. It is clear that such individuals have different priorities than the majority of their neighbors. And yet, Jesus would say they made the better choice.

Our lives are not measured by the check marks on our “to do” list and the orderliness of our homes, even though those things may give us great satisfaction. Instead, our lives are measured by our devotion to Christ and our commitment to God's Word. Living with a little mess, letting some things go, pushing back on societal expectations, choosing the “less expected” option, going against the flow is rarely the easiest way. But according to Jesus, it is the better way!

Making the better choice is about opening our ears and our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us instead of focusing only on telling Jesus what we think and want. Making the better choice means opening our calendars to living out the Great Commandment even when it doesn't conveniently fit into our busy schedule. Making the better choice means opening our wallets to the Holy Spirit's guidance instead of

limiting our giving to what is left over after the fulfilling of all our personal priorities. Making the better choice means leaving some things undone so that we have time to read the Bible and pray, to attend worship and serve others.

Of course, embracing the better choice does not mean we let everything else in our lives spiral out of control. It's still important to cook and eat nutritious meals, pay the mortgage and utility bills on time, and maintain good tax records in case we get a call from the IRS. But today, Jesus challenges us to look at our daily schedule, and to make better choices when it comes to the higher priority of God's Word. Sometimes we just need to put down our "to do" list and let some things go so that we may instead sit at the feet of Jesus. Amen.