

The Worst Church Member Ever
A Sermon for Every Sunday, July 17, 2016
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 10:38-42

The story of Mary and Martha is one of my favorites in the Bible, and this particular sermon is one of my favorites on this passage. When I preached it to my church in Washington a few years ago I started by saying: “In case you haven’t seen it in the bulletin yet, the title of today’s sermon is: ‘The Worst Church Member Ever.’ And then I said:

“Do I hear any nominations from the floor?”

They laughed at that, but then I said, “Let me see a show of hands: How many of you saw the sermon title on the marquee and came to church today thinking there was going to be an awards presentation of some kind? How many of you came because you wanted to see who would get the award? How many of you came because you wanted to make sure it wasn’t you? The sermon title suggests, doesn’t it, that there are good church members and bad church members, that along with all the rights of membership there are, also certain responsibilities, and that the difference between a good member and a bad one is the difference between fulfilling or not fulfilling those responsibilities. The sermon title assumes that being a member of a church is a little different from being a member of, say, the Price Club.

Not that everyone makes that assumption.

In that city, where parking was at such a premium, our church administrator used to tell me that people sometimes would sometimes stop by his office to ask how they could get one of those parking permits to hang from their rearview mirror so they could

use the church parking lot. When he told them that we only gave those out to our members they would sometimes ask, “If I join the church can I get one?” Well, technically speaking, yes, but it would be a poor church member who joined just so she could get free parking, wouldn’t it?

And our Child Development Center at that church gave priority to the children of church members when there was a waiting list for an available space in the Center. While it is good to know that membership has its privileges, again, it would be a poor church member who joined only to get his child into day care, wouldn’t it?.

When I think about good church members I think about people who come to committee meetings on a Sunday afternoon, the ones who serve up supper at the Wednesday night fellowship meal, the ones who volunteer in the nursery on Sunday morning. Those people give countless hours to the church in a year’s time. They show up early on Sunday morning and stay late, to count the offering or tidy up the sanctuary. Now, those are good church members. They not only join the church, they serve it. They give their time, their talents, their treasure. They come to worship and Sunday school. Some of them teach classes. Others cut the grass on the day before. *That’s* what I’m talking about. *Good* church members. The kind you want to give awards to. Thank God that almost every church has those kinds of members and not too many like Mary, the woman in our Gospel reading for today.

Mary must have been the worst church member ever. All she really wanted was a parking place at the feet of Jesus, and once she got it she just sat there. Can you imagine the calls from the Nominating Committee? “Mary, we’ve been wondering if you would agree to serve on the Social Committee. It’s a hard job, but a good one. You get to set

up for the potluck luncheon on the first Sunday of each month and help serve the Wednesday night suppers. Every once in a while we have a reception and we'd ask you to help with that. What do you think? Can I put you down for a yes?" "No," Mary says. I don't want to do all that stuff. I just want to sit at the feet of Jesus." Or a call from the Stewardship Committee: "Mary? Hi. We don't mean to nag but you still haven't returned your pledge card. You are a member of the church aren't you? We really depend on our members to support our ministry, to help us do all those good things we do in the community and to provide for the needs of our wonderful staff, our beautiful facilities. Mary? Hello, Mary? Are you there?" But she's not there. She's not on the phone, she's at the feet of Jesus, drinking in everything he has to say.

I'm glad we don't have too many members like that.

Scholars have noted that this is where we always find Mary in the gospels, at the feet of Jesus. Here in the tenth chapter of Luke she sits at his feet and listens. In the eleventh chapter of John she falls at his feet and weeps, because her brother has died. In the twelfth chapter of that gospel she pours expensive perfume over his feet and wipes them with her hair. She's always there, where he is, and always assuming this humble posture. To sit at the feet of someone was the usual way of talking about the relationship between a disciple and a teacher in those days. Paul says that he "sat at the feet" of the famous rabbi, Gamaliel, in his younger days and some scholars have suggested that may have been the privileged place, front and center, right there at the master's feet. When I go to a preaching conference where some well-known preacher is speaking I don't sit on the back row; I like to get as close to the pulpit as I can, right there where the "good stuff" comes down. That's where Mary liked to be, right there at the feet of Jesus, where

the good stuff came down. She would sit there with a big, beatific smile on her face, taking in every word.

It drove her sister crazy.

Martha was the kind of member every church wants to have. She not only served on the social committee, she was the chairman. Every time there was a big event at church she was on the phone, calling the other members of the committee, making sure they would have enough food, that there would be floral arrangements, that the fellowship hall was clean and ready. She never missed a detail. She had won the church's award for distinguished service four years in a row! It was only natural when she heard that Jesus was coming to town that she would invite him to come to her home for a meal, and she wanted it to be a special meal, too. She had been at it all day, putting out the fine china, pressing the linen tablecloth, polishing the silver. Since noon she had been simmering pots of stock on the stove, tasting them from time to time, making sure they were perfect. It was no small undertaking, especially with all those disciples Jesus had brought with him. She had to put an extra leaf in the dining room table, and set the table in the kitchen for those disciples whose names no one could ever remember. She had picked out several bottles of good wine, lit a few of those aromatic candles, selected some appropriate background music. But in that last hour before dinner things began to get a little hectic. She had too many pots going on the stove at the same time and not nearly enough help. She thought about her sister, Mary, sitting in the living room at the master's feet, with that big, goofy grin on her face. The more she thought about it the madder she got, until finally she just wiped her hands on her apron and marched in there.

This is the moment that is recorded in the Gospel and it's a moment I think we have all imagined: Jesus, sitting there in the big, leather chair next to the fireplace; his disciples crowded onto the couch, the love seat, some of them sitting on the floor; Mary, right there in front of Jesus, looking up at him adoringly; and Martha, pushing her way through the crowd until she can lean over and whisper in his ear. You can't really hear what she's saying, but you can tell that she's upset—her body language gives it away—and the way she keeps pointing at Mary lets you know what she's upset about. Jesus listens, looks at Mary, nods, and then responds in a voice that only Martha can hear. “Martha,” he says, like someone trying to calm a high-strung thoroughbred before the start of a race. “Martha. You're fretting over so many things, distracted by all these details. I'm sure your dinner is going to be wonderful, but the most important thing that's going on in this house tonight is going on right here, and Mary has made the choice to be here for it, and I'm not going to ask her to give that up.”

Members of the social committee sometimes say to me after I have preached on this passage, “Yes, but I bet Jesus would have been singing a different tune if Martha had just been sitting there at his feet when supper time rolled around. Don't you think he might have looked up then and said, ‘Hey, isn't anybody going to fix us some dinner?’” Probably so. It is so important that we don't make Martha out to be the villain in this story. She was loving Jesus in the best way she knew how. She was giving him every good thing she had to give. I'm guessing that as she planned the menu, as she picked out the wine, she did it with his pleasure in mind. But for those who have ears to hear it in this supertime story there is a recipe for simplicity. As I once told our church secretary, “It's not hard to simplify your life; all you have to do is decide what the one thing is, the

one most important thing, and then do that.” The doing isn’t hard, but the deciding is. Out of all those things that clamor for your attention, all those voices calling your name, you’re supposed to pick one? This is why that scribe once asked Jesus, “Which of the commandments is most important?” Because he’d been trying to keep all of them, all the time, and he was exhausted by the effort. “If I could only manage one of them,” he might have said, “which one would it be?” “This one,” Jesus answered: “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and the second most important is to love your neighbor as yourself.”

Isn’t it interesting that in the passage just before this one in Luke’s Gospel a lawyer asks Jesus the same kind of question? And in that story the focus is on that love for the neighbor. After telling the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells the lawyer to go and do likewise, go love your neighbor just as much as you love yourself. And in the very next passage we find Martha, doing just that. She is loving her neighbor Jesus by cooking him the biggest and best dinner she can manage. The pots are simmering. The kitchen is filled with good smells. She’s pushing the damp strands of hair back from her forehead, wearing herself out with *doing*. And then Jesus reminds her that the first commandment, the most important thing in the world, is not to love your neighbor, but to love the Lord, and there is Mary, the worst church member ever, sitting at his feet, doing precisely that.

It would be so much easier if our choices in life were between good things and bad things, but so often they are between one good thing and another. It’s good to sit at the feet of the Lord and listen. It’s good to cook him a nice, big dinner. To choose between the two is hard. Mary did it. And so did Martha. And in the end all Jesus said

was that Mary had chosen the better part, to love the Lord her God, with all her heart, and mind, and soul, and strength. If we could make the same choice not only would our lives be simpler, but our church membership would take on a different quality. We wouldn't do the things we do so we could get a parking permit or even the award for distinguished Christian service. Instead everything we did—the gifts of our time, our talent, our treasure, the teaching of a class, the cutting of the grass—would be an overflowing expression of our love for God.

Which is the most important thing of all.