

Works Without Faith?

Luke 10:38-42

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Prayer: In the quietness of these moments, O God, and as we open your word, teach us what we need to know, and show us what we need to do, to be faithful followers of Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

I am thrilled to have been invited back, and to stand once again in this sacred space. When I read the Lectionary texts for today, and particularly this text from Luke, I was a bit taken aback. Because it's kind of an unusual, possibly confusing text. You know, one of those "Jesus said what?" texts. So, full confession, I did go to the well, as preachers say, and checked my sermon files to see how I handled this text in the past. And to my surprise, the cupboard was bare. Then it occurred to me that I was usually away for a good part of the summer. So, I received the gift of approaching a familiar story, but one on which I had never before preached.

I said that the text is unusual, and by that, I mean there is a built-in tension here. It starts simply enough. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he stops at a particular village where Mary and Martha live. Martha invites Jesus into their home and begins doing what is customary in that ancient culture. She begins preparing a lavish meal for her guest. It cannot be overstated how important extending hospitality was in Jesus' day. But while Martha was beginning to cook up a storm, her sister Mary opts out of providing hospitality, leaving it all up to Martha. Instead of joining her sister in the kitchen, which would have been the customary thing for her to do, Mary sat down at Jesus' feet, and listened carefully to what he was teaching them.

Of course, this was not lost on Martha, who became perturbed at doing all the work alone. But rather than going out there and tapping Mary on the shoulder and giving her "The Look," as if to say, "I could use a little help in the kitchen," Martha goes directly to Jesus, triangulating him in a point of contention between the two sisters.

Lord, don't you care? Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

And who doesn't understand Martha's frustration? But Jesus responds,

Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but there is need of only one thing, and Mary has chosen the better part.

Well, what does that mean? On the surface, it sounds like Jesus is being rather condescending. It's like Jesus skipped pastoral care class the day they discussed empathy? Because then he might have at least responded, "Martha, what I hear you saying is that you're frustrated with your sister." Wouldn't that have been a more compassionate reply to Martha?

I discovered that a familiar explanation given for Jesus' reply, is to suggest that he was paving the way for women to officially serve in ministry, by allowing Mary to sit at his feet, with the men as he taught. To me, that seems pretty weak on the surface, especially since many women were among Jesus' followers and were already engaged in his ministry. This text may be an example of it, but I don't think that's the point of it.

So, what does Jesus mean? How is it that Mary has chosen the better part, by sitting and listening to Jesus, while Martha slaves away in a hot kitchen in order to provide hospitality?

The story of God, in the person of Jesus the Christ, takes place in ways and in realms that are both spiritual, yet grounded in the everyday reality and complexities of this often bruised and hurting world. And many people struggle with that. How much easier if it could all just be spiritual, perfect, out there somewhere, unencumbered by pain and human suffering. So, we sometimes get stuck, or easily distracted, and sometimes even consumed by things as they unfold or unravel in front of us.

There is so much to worry about. There's mounting fear in the air, don't you feel it? So much tension as our world sometimes seems to be falling apart or is being undone. Another mass shooting. A rise in acts of bigotry and racism. Inflation. An increase in hate crimes. Losing a fundamental right that had been taken for granted and fearing what might be on the chopping block next. And a Church, my Lord! A church whose evangelical wings largely and increasingly sound like unhinged, angry lunatics. My apologies to actual lunatics. I'm talking about the spewing of hate and anger and racism, and a radical agenda against the poor and sick that in no way shape or form, represents the Christ to whose name they appeal. I'm talking about so called pastors, encouraging their members to shoot and kill gay people. I hesitate to even call them churches. They are idolatrized temples of ignorance and misplaced patriotism.

Tragically, the evangelical wing of Christianity has inflicted real damage on the Body of Christ. Young people want no part of a church that condemns their Muslim and Transgender friends. And many, not just young people, have seen the glaring hypocrisies between what they know Jesus taught and yet what they hear in church, and the tone in which they hear it. And they have left in droves.

I think it's why so many well-meaning people fall back on the line, "I'm spiritual but not religious." That always tempts me to reply cynically, "That's really interesting, and I lie a lot." But I get what they're saying and where they're coming from. Enough of a church telling us who

to hate. Enough of a church telling us who's not welcome. And enough of a religion that is afraid to exist alongside of science and history and scholarship.

There is no denying that our faith is lived out in the messy details of this world and our daily lives. But it's also here, where we encounter the power and presence of the living God, in real and tangible ways. In acts of beauty and grace. Selfless love and expressions of kindness, overflowing with compassion. Healing, forgiveness, and new life. Discovering peace not as the world gives it. Looking into the eyes of one you know loves you unconditionally, and who you can trust, no matter what. This is where and how we meet God.

So, let's first accept that Jesus was not criticizing Martha for preparing that meal. It was an obvious act of devotion and service, just like anytime anyone shows up to serve hungry people at Loaves & Fishes, or work in a food pantry, or volunteers to tutor children, or teach church school, or make blankets for homeless kids moving into Prior Crossing, or works in the Community Garden, or pounds nails at a Habitat for Humanity build. Or checks in on an elderly neighbor. Or takes the time to listen to someone who desperately needs to be heard. No, our faith requires action by doing certain things, making certain choices, and prioritizing our lives in ways that reflect our faith and values.

Remember, we love God why? Because God first loved us. In other words, the Christian life of faith is one lived as a gracious response to the gift of God's grace and unfailing love. The good we do is not to convince God to love us any more than God already does. That's impossible. Rather, it's a way we say thank you to God. So of course, faith requires action.

But getting back to Jesus' response to Martha, here's a premise I'd like to offer. We acknowledge that of course, Jesus appreciated Martha's work of hospitality. It is important and he was not dismissing it. And Jesus also appreciated, and valued Mary for gaining a more in depth understanding about the teachings of her Lord. So, let's ponder, that perhaps, in this particular instant, Jesus is letting his followers, he's letting us know all these years later, how important it is for us to be grounded in our faith and beliefs, because that informs our actions. Faith and works go hand and hand—they are two sides of the same coin.

We have often heard that faith without works is dead. But I would caution that works without faith can be exhausting, and life sucking, leaving us in despair.

Without a solid theological grounding, without the faith in a God, who in Christ Jesus and through the power of the Spirit, is at work in this weary world, redeeming this world to God's self—without that, it would be easy to fall into hopelessness. Without believing in something larger and beyond ourselves and our understanding, this world will weigh us down and maybe get the best of us.

And the reason it is so important to understand how our faith informs our actions, and the way we carry ourselves in the world is because, as I mentioned earlier, we see multiple examples today of people who have no clue what the faith they claim actually teaches them to do. I used

to believe that on some of the more contentious issues of faith, differences occurred because of varying biblical interpretations. I no longer believe that. Things have moved in such a way that I now believe people like White Christian nationalists, hate and fear mongers, don't even read the Bible. They have no basic understanding of Jesus' teachings, and espouse beliefs diametrically opposed to a vision of the world Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount.

Because as long as school and parade and church shootings continue, as long as we are forced to see the horrific images from Ukraine, the more we fear the next virus, climate change, and the erosion of democracy as we've known it—the sometimes cruelty of this world can overwhelm us.

So, we need to be cultivating a faith that allows us to proclaim, with assurance, what the faithful down through the ages have proclaimed:

That this world's rough places will be made smooth and its crooked places straightened out. That love always wins out over hate, just like truth over lies, and good over evil. That tyrants will be pulled down from their thrones, and the meek and lowly will be lifted up. And that the broken-hearted will be made whole. That darkness cannot overcome the light, and justice will one day roll down like a mighty stream. And that God, as author and finisher of all things, will have the last word about everything!

Or in the words of the great hymn, *And though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet*. Or, as Dr. King so eloquently reminds us when we are weary and close to despair, *The moral arch of the universe is long, and it always bends toward justice*. Teach us what we need to know, and show us what we need to do...

Last week, Sister Simone Campbell received the Presidential Medal of Freedom at a White House ceremony. You'll perhaps remember that Sister Campbell is the organizer of the Nuns on a Bus tour. In response to criticism of nuns world-wide, from then Pope Benedict, for supposedly advocating ideas contrary to Catholic orthodoxy, Sister Campbell doubled down. She rallied a group of nuns, who got on a bus and did a nation-wide tour, calling attention to the places of injustice and the needs of the poor. Don't mess with the Sisters! After the ceremony, she was asked how it felt to receive this nation's highest civilian honor. Simone Campbell said, "It is unbelievable to receive this award for simply doing what felt natural for me to do." And that's it right there!

People of God, there is much work to do. There is organizing and advocacy, as well as visioning the future—this church, made new. As you get about that work, may your deep faith in a just, faithful, and loving God, sustain and encourage you in all your days.

Amen.