

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 18, 2010

TEXT: Luke 10:38-42

...Rev. Charles R. Exley

Jesus jumped right in the middle of it. He always seems to do that. Without hesitation he took the bait and stepped right in between two arguing sisters. Once again, he defies all conventional wisdom. Experts tell us that, of all the possible troubles existing between siblings, there is nothing more volatile and more traumatic than fighting sisters. In fact, the only other family fight that might be more vicious is that between a mother and a daughter. And, angry sisters are dangerously close. But, Jesus boldly charges in, as only he is prone to do. In my mind, that very fact is partial proof of his divinity. He fears no human encounter of any kind.

But, Jesus' unconventional behavior makes us look closely at these incidents that are recorded about him. There is more to this story than Jesus' saying, 'now is the time to sit and listen.' There is no point in making the actions of Jesus appear too obvious. Like investigative reporters we're drawn to dig deeply into the characters and the situations. If finding new insights into our own lives is the goal, then looking into these biblical incidents as closely as we possibly can is precisely what we must do. And that, to my way of thinking, is exactly why Jesus jumps into the middle of this situation, prying open the lid for all to see: it is to give us a chance to find everything there is to discover. Think like an investigator and you'll see what I mean.

The first thing we notice in detail is the setting. We're in the small village of Bethany. Jesus and his disciples stop there on their way to Jerusalem. It is, perhaps, eight miles from the city. Jesus spends time there in the home of a woman named Martha. We're pretty sure it's happened before – they were friends. Notice, however, that Luke does not say, "the home of Mary and Martha." No, this was Martha's house. Mary lived there, but this was Martha's house. This makes it likely that Martha was a widow. That's just about the only way a woman would come to own such property. And, this description makes it likely that Martha was the older sister; Mary the younger.

That conclusion about the sisters moves us toward the matter of birth order. It's a key factor in understanding their relationship. That's something we've learned in recent years. In 2009, Dr. Kevin Leman updated his book entitled, "The Birth Order Book, Why You Are the Way You Are." Dr. Leman maintains that birth order sets the course for much of our accomplishment in life. The first born is the achiever, the middle sibling goes along, and the baby craves and gets all the attention. Dr. Leman had originally titled his book, "Abel Had It Coming," but I guess that didn't fly with the publisher. The descriptions of this controversy between siblings – in our text - actually tell us quite a bit about Martha and Mary. Did you notice that Martha did not take her complaints first to Mary herself? That would have been the reasonable thing to do. No, she went straight to Jesus, saying: "Fix this situation." And, for some reason, he accepts the challenge. We also have every reason to believe this is not an isolated incident. This is a long-term relationship issue between the two sisters. Consequently, Mary is well entrenched in the matter of "doing her own thing," while Martha has always been the overly-responsible caretaker.

Our investigation now lets us see the cultural issues that come into play. In Jesus' day, hospitality was a much bigger issue than it is today... something that remains to be true in

Middle Eastern cultures. Martha was not wrong to be concerned about her role as host. Many of us can relate to that; even admire her for the depth of her caring. Martha had opened her home to thirteen hungry men. And, also in keeping with the expectations of the time, the disciples no doubt did very little to help. Male-female role distinctions made issues of food and entertaining a female responsibility. This would surely have added to the conflict between the two sisters. But... perhaps even more important, these culture-bound expectations made some of Mary's actions extraordinary at best; much more remarkable than we would realize on first reading.

The piece we're likely to miss comes in the words, "...who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." Luke very casually uses these words to describe what Mary is doing while Martha is scurrying around with trays of food. Without our cultural investigation, we might not know that to sit at a rabbi's feet was a sign that this person was receiving formal training as a disciple. Paul describes himself with these words, as a student of the famed Gamaliel in the book of Acts. Have you taken the cultural leap? Have you realized fully what is going on? This scene of sitting at the teacher's feet was a place for males. Mary was interjecting herself – intruding – into the world of men as an equal. Martha was busily carrying out the cultural role of women – and doing a particularly stellar job. Mary was sitting where she did not belong, doing what she should not have been doing. And, everyone in the room knew it.

If you think this is a small matter, take another look. Women were exempt from the study of the Torah. The Mishnah, the first written commentary on Jewish law, beginning about 70 AD, says things like, "May the words of the Torah be burned, they should not be handed over to women." Rabbi Eliezer, who lived around 90 AD, said, "If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery." Another rabbi of the time said it was more profitable to teach your dog the Scripture than your wife. The idea that Mary would go in and sit at Jesus' feet was not just bold, it was astonishing.

I guess we've gathered enough background in our investigation. Now that we're prepared, take another look at Jesus. Jesus encourages Mary to sit there and listen to him as he taught in the house. It is Jesus who makes a mockery of the cultural traditions. Had it been some other teacher visiting the home of Martha, it is quite likely that Mary would not be sitting there, no matter how interested she might have been. It is Jesus who gently chides Martha, not Mary. That's the answer; that's why Jesus is willing to jump into the middle of this disagreement between sisters. It is Jesus telling them both that their place is the place of a disciple. Martha can serve as host any time. She can assume her rightful place as disciple only now. There is no more time. Jesus knew what the women did not know: there was very little time left. And so it is, with love in his eyes and a tender smile on his lips, Jesus said to Martha: "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 from her." Nor, Martha, will it be taken from you.

One final thought – thinking as one who investigates carefully what Jesus said and did: It's a thought suggested by the well-known theologian and biblical scholar Foster McCurley – someone I was privileged to hear and talk with on a couple occasions. Do you think it is a coincidence that this incident with Martha and Mary is reported immediately after Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan? I think not, along with Dr. McCurley. Put the two stories together and you get two examples of a person who is willing to step outside what is accepted, as well as what is

acceptable. You get two examples of Jesus holding up the one who acts out of living faith, to the surprise of all those who might be watching. You get two examples of persons who will likely be attacked for what they have done. You get two persons who – regardless of what might happen – would not even consider living their life another way.

Jesus loved both sisters – Martha the responsible leader and Mary the rebel. Surely Jesus helped them to recognize that they would not only learn from him, they would also learn from each other. May it be so for us all.