

“This is NOT a dress rehearsal – this is your life!”

1

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 22, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 10:38-42

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, there is an old joke that I have told before, but it is a little bit funny, and it is a little bit hmmm, that makes a point.

It seems that one late night, a young pastor was in his church office working on his sermon, and he looked out the window and he saw Jesus looking in. He was startled! He didn't know what to do! So he called his district superintendent. That's our chain of command. He said, "Listen, Jesus is looking in the window. What should I do?" The district superintendent was not certain so she said, "Call the Bishop's office." He did. He said, "Bishop, Jesus is looking in my window. What should I do?" The wise Bishop thought for just a moment, and finally said, "Look busy." Look busy.

We live in a culture where we think our life is not meaningful unless we are doing something. What do we do at a social gathering when you're meeting people just for the first time? One of the first questions we ask when we meet someone is not how are you doing, but what do you do? After we find out what they do, we know whether they are important enough to spend time with.

While Mary was listening, Martha was doing. Of course, there are two parts of faith, the hearing and then the doing. So often we come here to church, and we hear, and then we leave as if the act of hearing is the act of faith. We go home, and we do what we have always done, unchanged. Jesus spoke to that. He said in Matthew, 7<sup>th</sup> chapter, "Not everyone who calls me Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do what my Father in Heaven wants them to do." He once asked in frustration, I think with a certain irony, in the Gospel of Luke, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, if you're not going to do what I tell you?" Again in Luke, "Anyone who hears my words and does not obey them is like a man who built his house without laying a foundation, and when the flood hit that house, it fell at once, and it was a terrible crash."

Yes, we are called to be busy, but first we should be absolutely certain that we have heard. We must stop and listen and hear first, and then go about God's business in whatever ways we are talented and equipped and able to do.

Now, Main Street as a congregation is just now catching its breath from a storm of doing and building and constructing and paying for new renovations and new growth, and now, through the Natural Church Development Program, the surveys that we've given to you, a good cross section of the congregation, and we are through that. Backing up a little bit, backing up and listening, listening to what we should do with all the space and all the talent that we have in this church family. We cannot, as some have said, back up and listen before we acted, we've already acted. We can and we will listen to the survey results we get this afternoon at 4:00 p.m., if you're on the NCD health team, weed and

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2

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seed team I have called it, today at 4:00 p.m. we need you in the Trinity classroom. When we see those results, we will act differently from here on out.

Doing and listening work together when serving God and growing our faith, in growing a congregation, and growing programs and outreach. If we do not have an agreed upon, every-member reason for existence, every-member, overarching mission statement, which is more than words on a paper, but words that guide our every action, if we do not stop and listen and plan from what we hear, then we are merely doing busy work. Busy work! Not living the life of faith we were called to. Starting this afternoon when we get our survey results, we will begin the process of listening to how you have heard God speak, and what you have heard as a road map forward from here. No more spinning our wheels! No more doing for the sake of doing! That is worldly wisdom, but Jesus praises not the frantic doing, but the listening and the learning and then growing from there.

The story of Martha and Mary is not a contrast between sitting and serving. It is meant to point out the difference between hearing the Word and incorporating that Word into your life plan, on the one hand, and the superficial, anxious doing for the sake of doing, without even asking is this what God wants me to do, on the other hand. Martha's resentment, and by the way, if you resent everything you do in the church, sit down! Stop doing it! You are doing what you want to do, and not what God called you to do if you resent it. If you complain to everyone who will listen about how much you do, more than others, then you are on a self-assignment, and maybe, just maybe, the complaining is your reward. If you resent it, and get no sense of fulfillment from it, please stop it. Sit down and pray and listen and find out what you ought to be doing that does not engender resentment and spin off complaints.

I know a certain mother, and I said this morning, and I'll say it again, this is not Caroline, the mother of my children. This is definitely not her. I know a certain mother, who always sits sideways in her chair at mealtime, always poised for action, always inviting people over, and ready to jump up if she's forgotten something in the kitchen or jump up if somebody wants steak sauce instead of ketchup or jump up if it's time to pass the serving dishes around again. She never relaxes. Never! Never relaxes enough to enjoy the food or the company, and then she complains to us when we're there about the others she feeds, and probably complains about us to the others when we're not there. That's not living, and that's not hospitality. That is self-serving, unasked for, unnecessary martyrdom.

Martha's resentment came from that sort of attitude, I believe. It goes beyond having too much work to do. She sees Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, and would like a moment with Him as well if Mary would just help! Maybe Martha would have some time to talk with Him. Furthermore, Mary's presumptuous posture embarrasses Martha and brings shame on the household. In that day and that time, it was not proper for a woman to sit at the teacher's feet as a man would. It was just considered not done. Mary is sitting at the Lord's feet, and Martha calls Jesus, in verse 40, "Lord," and it's interesting, that's respectful, she says, "Lord," but in the same breath she rebukes Him and gives Him an

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 22, 2007

order. Did you catch that? She calls Him Lord, but she rebukes Him and then gives Him an order. She said, “Do you not care that I’m doing all the work and Mary is not helping? Tell her then to help me.” Hardly a respectful tone that one addresses using when you’re speaking to the Lord. Martha is focused on her own agenda, and she’s asking Jesus to align Himself with her agenda and that Mary also be aligned with her agenda. She’s not listening to what God would have her do. She is doing and doing and demanding that everyone else notice that she is doing and that they too get with her version of the plan.

There is a deliberate contrast in this Scripture here. Martha who tells Jesus what He must say and Mary who sits quietly and listens to what Jesus is saying. Is your, and this is the question for us as we look at this text, where does it hit us? Is your faith life, is your church life, is your stewardship and time and talent, is it about self-directed spinning your wheels or prayerful listening first and then doing what God has called and equipped each of you to do? There’s a quick test for that. It’s not very hard. If you begrudge it, it was your idea. If you gain fulfillment and peace from it, then it is an assignment from God.

Martha rebukes Mary and orders Jesus to order her to help doing her self-directed busy work. Jesus repeats Martha’s name as a gentle rebuke. He says, “Martha, Martha.” He notes her distraction rather than her hospitality. Certainly, He welcomes the food, and I have heard many, many, many – usually women on the way out after I preach a sermon like this – say, “Well, now, it would be a fine household if nobody cooked the food and nobody did the dishes.” Well, I know. Jesus did enjoy the food, but He welcomed the discipleship at this point in His ministry even more. We need to remember when this was. Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem and to the cross, and this was His final visit in Luke’s Gospel to the home of these dear friends, Mary and Martha. Martha’s busyness and her self-importance distanced her from Jesus. It’s a matter of priorities and timing. Jesus knows what awaits Him in Jerusalem, and He needs good friends now more than He needs good food. It could be that Martha may have allowed herself to be distracted in part as an escape from Jesus’ uncomfortable teachings. See Jesus had already begun to tell His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and die there. Martha may have heard Jesus say these things and have fled to the kitchen as an escape, pretending that was the most important thing in the world when the truth was in that moment, it was mere busywork. Anxious, self-directed, distraction instead of listening to what comes next. Of course, domestic things have to be done, but in that moment, more important things were going on. The text said she was distracted doing and anxious doing unnecessary things.

We, too, are busy about many things. We, too, are troubled and distracted and too often, we just do things, not knowing why or even thinking through what happens next, or more importantly, what happens after what happens next, thinking two steps down the road. We are a quick-fix society. We are an anxious society as if there are quick fixes to complex problems. There aren’t. Politicians often take advantage of our anxieties and our desire to see something done and so they do something without thinking what happens when that something is done. We see on bumper stickers sometimes, don’t just stand there, do something. Well, Jesus appears to be saying the opposite, don’t just do

“This is NOT a dress rehearsal – this is your life!”

4

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 22, 2007

something, first stand there or sit there and pray and listen to Jesus’ teaching and find out what it is best to do.

Church families and all other dysfunctional organizations, because there is no other kind, church families tend to do what they have always done, even when it doesn’t work, at least, it’s familiar. In my house, we call that folding paper bags. Folding paper bags. Nervous energy. When something is called for and all we know how to do is what we’ve always done so we sit there and fold paper bags in case, in the middle of the crisis, somebody needs a paper bag! Wouldn’t it be better to have a plan and to understand the issue and to know the end goal before you start. Martha may indeed have heard that Jesus was going to the cross and escaped to the kitchen to fold paper bags, to clean and to cook, and to pretend that doing the same old things would somehow work and somehow make it come out better.

We have our results from the survey today about our weakest spot in our program, our minimum factor, and our speed bump to growth. All will be revealed this afternoon, and the entire Main Street congregation will be fully informed as we change things and as we attack, that’s a strong word, attack the weakness with a plan and a real goal of focused faithful discipleship. We will endeavor not to do what Martha did and just fold paper bags and spin our wheels, burning nervous energy and nothing else. We will have the option and we will take it of changing our focus to problem solving and faithful growth. Many, many people would rather go on folding paper bags and busywork rather than look at themselves and the church and change. Mary even pushed the attitude, well, it’s all up to God anyway so let’s leave it alone and leave it up to God, we can eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. That’s in the Bible, too, but not a positive thing.

If God is going to do what God will do then what are we bothering about? We just come to church an hour or so a week and then we distract ourselves at home with TV’s and ATV’s and jet skis and live until we die. God will sort it out later. What could I do anyway?

Martha, Martha, what is the one thing that is necessary? Maybe God really does exist and is real and has something to say and something we can know by faith and make a difference in our lives so that our lives look different as we have a different goal after having listened and heard what God would have us do. Maybe. Now, we could just fold paper bags and burn off nervous energy, endlessly entertaining each other and ourselves until we’re finished. I believe, and I believe that Jesus taught that there’s more to life than what we see and what we do between birth and death. There is something else. There is a higher calling. Just as each heart has always suspected, God gives us that suspicion there’s something more. There is something higher and better and real that we can be doing. God has spoken to us. Through Jesus there is a way back into relationship. We need not be broken off from God or each other. There is a better goal than serving self, a better end to life than entertaining yourself until you die.

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This is your one life! It's not a dress rehearsal! It is your one life! Make sure that you have heard God's plan before you go off doing and complaining and then bragging about how busy you are. Maybe we should listen before we do. Listen to God. Take time in prayer and study in His word. Listen to Jesus' teaching, to God's spirit speaking in our hearts and saying, this way, now! This is the way I want you to go!

Let us pray. Lord, by your spirit guide us. By your Son's teaching, inform us. By your love and grace, empower us to be more perfectly your people, to not sit down satisfied at any one point in our faith or any one point in the life of this church, but to always be on the move, to always have our hand to our ear to listen and to hear where you are calling us to go. In Jesus' name, amen.