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Sitting at Jesus' Feet: The Priority of the Inward Journey

Luke 10:38-42 *"...there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

The story of Mary and Martha serves as a centerpiece for the spiritual life as an inward and outward journey of following Jesus. It can help us reflect on our lives with regard to prayer and service, contemplation and action, the balance and interrelatedness of the inward and outward dimensions of our living as people of faith.

Jesus is invited by Martha into her home. While Jesus is there, Martha is busy preparing dinner, perhaps, and maybe finishing up some cleaning and straightening. Her sister Mary, meanwhile, is sitting "at the Lord's feet" listening to what he has to say.

Right here is the first thing to say about the story. It shows a radical shift in the position of women. The phrase "sitting at the Lord's feet" is used to describe discipleship. To sit at the teacher's feet means to be a disciple, a follower, a student. Jesus is completely at ease with Mary's sitting at his feet, being a disciple. And if we read the gospels carefully, we see the broader picture of Jesus' followers. There were twelve who formed a kind of inner circle. Yet there were others, no less Jesus' followers, who included women. This story is a vivid illustration of Paul's words: "In Christ there is neither male nor female...." The history of the church with regard to the position of women reveals not only injustice but also an avoidance of what does it mean to BE a Christian. It means sitting at Jesus' feet and listening. A follower of Jesus is anyone whose heart, mind, and life is open to Jesus and what we learn through him.

The second thing is, of course, the contrast between Martha and Mary. Martha sticks her head in the doorway to complain to Jesus about her sister. Make her help me with all this work! We may find ourselves sympathetic to Martha. Here she is "doing all the work," while her sister just sits there listening to Jesus. It doesn't seem fair, does it?

Jesus responds in a gently chiding way. "Martha, you are distracted and anxious about many things. There is only one necessary thing. Mary has chosen it, and it is something that can never be taken from her, that she will never lose." Jesus is not saying that we are to do nothing but sit around in silence and listening. Discipleship also means doing what we believe Jesus calls us to do for the sake of the world. The outward journey IS important. However, the outward, the doing, can become a distraction and a source of anxiousness, causing us to miss or lose altogether what it is all about, the meaning of it all. The story is not saying that DOING is bad and BEING is good. I think Jesus is talking about priorities. Doing must be rooted in and flow out of being, of listening. And when our doing starts filling us with anxiousness and making us distracted, then it is time to go back and sit at Jesus' feet, to listen, to be quiet.

We here at the Church of the Covenant would agree with all of this...at least intellectually. We talk about the importance of silence and inner listening. It is part of our spiritual practices as Covenant and Community Members. Also, the importance of the reading and study of scripture, as well as other things that help us "sit and listen". Yet we sometimes fall into complaints about how hard it is to make time each day for the inward journey. Our schedules are so full. We have so many responsibilities. We have these important missions to support, all this work to do. There are times we feel that we just don't have time for even thirty minutes a day for our inward journey. Of course it's a good ideal to shoot for, but with so many important things to be done, who has the time? If we find ourselves thinking this way, it reveals that we are still see the inward journey as something that is good IF you have the time for it, something rather optional. The most important thing is keeping busy with all that we have to do.

Jesus doesn't seem to buy that. We have the time when we MAKE the time for what is most important. Jesus' view seems to be that what we call the inward journey, which is the way we speak of "listening to Jesus", is the thing that is most important, that is prior to everything else. It is the one thing that will never be taken from us, which we can never lose. Why? Because when we are working daily with our inward journey, cultivating our ability to be inwardly quiet and attentive, we are waking up to life. We are beginning to pay attention to our own lives and life around us. We are learning how to drop our distractions and anxiousness, and along with that, our fears. We are growing in self-understanding and in our relationship with God.

It is as though Jesus is saying to Martha, and also to us, I know you think you are serving me with all those things you are doing. But they are only making you preoccupied and, frankly, a bit crabby! You want to drag Mary into your frenzy of activity and fretfulness. The good news for Martha, and for us, is that she can stop all of that. She doesn't have to continue in her agitated and stressed out state. She can stop, become quiet, and listen. She can shift the balance of her life, give her life a new center. Not all the anxious activity, not all the fretfulness, but a quiet center where she is in touch with God, with herself, and with life around her.

This little story is a perfect touch-stone for us as a community. It helps us reflect on ourselves with regard to the outward and inward dimensions of our lives. Are we fretful and anxious, consumed by all the things we are doing so that we are out of touch with our own lives, with other people, and with life around us? Has the balance of our lives shifted away from the inward journey to a compulsiveness about getting things done, accomplishing great things, yet being filled with anxiousness and distraction? Or perhaps our inward journey itself has taken on the character of work! We go through the motions, maybe doing lots of reading or writing in our journals, maybe lost in our endless thinking about all kinds of things. Yet we have gotten away from the quiet sitting and inner listening that enables us to be open to God, to life around us, and to ourselves. The story of Mary and Martha is like a mirror that can help us look at how we are doing when it comes to the life of discipleship, sitting at Jesus' feet and drawing life from his teachings.

One last thing about the story. I received an e-mail from Hope yesterday telling me that a friend of hers had died. It made her think of a portion of Jesus' words to Martha that we had not really dealt with Wednesday morning during our discussion of the lectionary. Jesus said that Mary had chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. There is so much of life that is taken away from us, that we have to let go of, that is not lasting. All of the things that we do, all of our accomplishments, all that we seek to achieve, all that we spend our time and energies on, even the relationships we cherish and want to hold onto. We hope that some of the good we do will have a lasting effect. And our relationships do have deep and shaping effects on our lives. Jesus was saying that Mary, by her sitting and listening, by her openness to what he had to teach, was rooting her life in something that was lasting, that would never be lost or taken from her. It was her attentiveness to her own life in relationship to God. That is what matters most in our living and in our dying.

When I think about the importance of cultivating our spiritual lives, of making the time to give attention to the inward journey, of growing in our capacity to be still and quiet and listening, my deepest sense of the urgency about it is just this: We are paying attention to that which, beyond everything else that we do in our lives, will never be taken from us, can never be lost. It is also the source of living a life that is full, joyful, and loving.