

On Doing and Being
Luke 10:25-42
Northminster Presbyterian Church
March 5, 2017
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Today, we begin by remembering that the Gospel of Luke is the great literary work of the Gospels. John is the poetry, Matthew is the drama, Mark is the urgency. But Luke, Luke is the literature. His Greek is the most sophisticated and his way of telling the stories seems to have more intention than the other gospels. How he puts the gospel together — what goes where, which story follows which — has meaning for Luke and his readers.

Which is why it may come as a surprise even to those of you, who were familiar with the Parable of the Good Samaritan and that uncomfortable story of Mary and Martha, might not have known they come back to back like this. And because they are smashed together, we are invited to look at them in a different way when we consider them together.

For years, most of us have viewed the Parable of the Good Samaritan as the Progressive Church's marching orders — be like the Samaritan, be the good neighbor, welcome and care for the stranger, the outsider. If the Samaritan can do the right thing surely we can. We don't want to be like that closed-off Priest and Levite.

So, that first famous story is about being inclusive and surrendering prejudice — in mission — right? Going and doing likewise; caring for everyone we meet, no matter who they are — right? And then there is Mary and Martha, the hard worker and the hardly working, the one who does what is right and good for a host — particularly in Jesus' day when hospitality was one of the most important social values. Martha is looking to the needs of her guests and Mary sits and listens to a guest. We are puzzled by Jesus' basically telling Martha to get off Mary's back, that by spending time with Jesus instead of being the perfect host, Mary was choosing the better part.

You can see why the stories would be divided up. At first glance, they don't make sense together. How can we be both — like the Samaritan and like Mary — at the same time? What if, what if, we've missed one of the main points Jesus and Luke are making all along? Did you notice? What happens to Martha's hospitality when she can't help thinking about Mary and how she is not helping? Mary gets distracted, so distracted that she throws her hospitality out the window and puts the guest in her house on the spot. "Jesus, tell my sister to get to work." If you were a guest in someone's home and they came up to you and said, "Go tell my sister to stop talking with you and get to work," it's not exactly hospitable is it?

So how does that link the two stories? Let's think about it for a second. What makes the Samaritan a good neighbor — that he helps the wounded man? Sure, but it's more than that. As a Samaritan, this man was the ultimate persona non grata in the Jewish world of Judea. For 500 years, the Samaritans had been the ultimate heretics. They followed Yahweh, but they did it all wrong. One scholar has compared the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus' time as being similar to the relationship between the Shia and Suni sects of Islam — so much in common, but so much dividing them.

So it's not simply the shock of having a Samaritan be the hero of this story that makes him stand out; it's that he doesn't get distracted by the fact that he and the man in the ditch are supposed to be enemies; it's that, if he shows up at that inn — a Samaritan carrying a Jew who has been beaten and robbed — he's likely to be the main suspect for the people of the town.

And there it is: Distraction.

According to a 2015 study of employers conducted by careerbuilder.com the number one killer of workplace productivity — the one cited by more than 50 percent of employers — is this. Also in 2015, the YouGov marketing firm and the app company, Listen, conducted a survey of over a thousand professionals and 43 percent of the doctors and nurses surveyed said they played electronic games on their phones while they are on the clock with patient responsibilities. And we know that the distraction of these wonderful devices isn't just a joke about work time or your doctor playing Candy Crush between patients. In 2014, almost 3,200 Americans died in traffic accidents caused by electronics-distracted drivers (distraction.gov). Many states across the country, after decades of car safety improvements led to reduction after reduction in auto deaths, are now experiencing an increase in driving fatalities and hit pedestrians all due to distraction caused by cell phones.

The priest and the Levite are distracted from their callings. We aren't told why. And they fail to care for a bleeding man; indeed they cross the street to avoid him. Martha allows her hurt feelings and her perhaps understandable sense of justice and fairness to distract her from the reason she is working so diligently. And hospitality becomes drudgery and a guest is made to not feel welcome in her home.

The Samaritan is not distracted from responding to need and Mary is not distracted from being with and learning from the Son of Man who is actually visiting her home. They both encounter risk to remain true to the Being and Doing they are called to undertake.

All of this takes place just a few verses after the text we read on Ash Wednesday, when we learned that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and all that will happen there. Jesus is now on another mission. For most of nine chapters, he's been teaching and preaching and healing. And he will continue to do that. But now, with his face toward Jerusalem — toward the crowd that will welcome him and turn on him five days later, toward the religious leaders that are already plotting against him, toward the kangaroo courts that will send him to a cross to die; and yes, toward that ultimate reversal that at this point he can only imagine. But from this point onward, Jesus will not be distracted from the task at hand.

Perhaps putting these two stories together is Luke's way of reminding us that we face a similar invitation in all our being and doing. It is so easy for us to be distracted, not just by our cell phones, but by life itself, by the demands of the job and the family and the pastimes and the news and the swirling scandals of Washington and Springfield. It's so easy to lose the thread that is drawing us forward. The baptismal calling that sends us out every morning as the beloved of the very source of love, the particular callings that our passions and our talents and the world's great needs combine to make each of us and all of us part of a great cloud of witnesses to God's saving, transforming love. That's why we don't condemn the lawyer or the priest or the Levite or Martha, because we've all been them so many times — so distracted by

life that we fail to do what needs to be done, or doing what needs to be done but so distracted by other things that we lose the thread of why.

Jesus and the Samaritan in his parable, and Mary in his life, are all undistracted. And we find it hard to relate to their perfection. But perhaps that's the point, too. For I don't believe that the similarities between Jesus and the Samaritan are by accident. The Samaritan is the unrestricted one, the one who will be hated and rejected. But that will not deter him from seeing to the healing of those who would hate him. And though he goes away for a while, he makes provision for the care of the wounded man and promises to return.

I've come to believe that Jesus' answer to the man who asks, what must I do to inherit the kingdom of God? Is — Nothing. For I think Jesus is inviting the lawyer to see that the ultimate neighbor who loves is the Son of Man. And that he, the lawyer, is the man in the ditch. He is desperate to be "whole," desperate to have life, eternal life in his case, and the only one who can make it possible, can prevent him from perishing, is the Samaritan, the Christ, who has set his face toward Jerusalem so that that the wounded one — all wounded ones — can be whole.

And Mary, Mary is the one who takes time from the many distractions of life to spend time in the presence of God. It's as though she is the wounded one, now healed, who seeks to learn and worship and grow.

Friends, I want to suggest that our invitation this Lent is to let go of the distractions that keep us from seeing that the same God who made us in love, is even now tending to our wounds— for we all have them in different ways — and who invites us to be a part of the healing of the world's wounds, but also invites us to spend time just being—maybe in prayer, maybe in contemplation, maybe in the scriptures, maybe in the beauty of nature—some time to just be in the presence of the God in Christ who wants us to understand just how deeply we, and all of God's children are cherished, how nothing we have done and nothing we are can change that, and how ironically taking that love in, being confident in it, can't help but change us. That sounds like a Lent spent walking in his ways to me. May God make it so.