

Luke 10:25-42

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, '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 away from her.'

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Life is full of choices, isn't it? We make decisions every day that may have real consequences for ourselves and for other people. Unless you are a diabetic, I'm not talking about what you eat for breakfast. I'm talking about whether you wear your seat belt when you drive to the store. I'm talking about whether you pick up the phone when it rings. I'm talking about how you spend your time, and how you interact with other people.

Our Gospel reading this morning has two famous stories about that very subject. Mary and Martha disagree about how to deal with Jesus in their home, and Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The story of the two sisters, Mary and Martha, is only moderately well-known in the culture outside the church, but it has been quite influential among women in the church. I have seen many congregational Presbyterian Women organizations, for example, with a Mary circle and a Martha circle, stressing study on the one hand and service on the other.

Martha has invited Jesus into their home, and she is bustling around, doing many things, working to provide hospitality to their guest. I'm sure that water has to be provided for Jesus to wash. The table has to be set for dinner, and a guest room prepared. All these things have to be done, and Martha is worried about every one of them.

Hospitality in the Middle East was and is a big deal. This is one piece of culture that has not changed in more than two thousand years, since Abraham entertained angels unawares.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18.

So Martha is frazzled. We don't know whether she is concerned most about her reputation, or about the impression she is making on Jesus, or about meeting the standards of proper hospitality in her own eyes, but she is flustered and frazzled and overwhelmed.

Mary, on the other hand, is entirely calm. She sits at Jesus' feet, where a good student would sit, and she is soaking up every word that Jesus says.

Finally, Martha can't take it any more, and she blurts out, "Lord, don't you care that my sister is leaving all the work for me? Tell her to help me!"

Jesus, as is so often the case, does not give Martha precisely the answer that she wants. He tells Martha that she is worried and distracted by many things, but that only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, and he will not permit it to be taken away from her.

What does this mean? Biblical scholars for millennia have interpreted this to mean that study is more important than service in the world. The intellectually honest scholars do have to admit, though, that this interpretation is kind of self-serving.

You should always check again any reading of the Bible that tells you to do exactly what you wanted to do anyway. Especially when Jesus is not responding directly to the exact question we are asking, it is very easy to hear what we want to hear instead of what he is saying.

So let's look at this story in context.

What is right after this story is Jesus teaching his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer.<sup>2</sup>

What is right before this story is the story of the Good Samaritan.

A lawyer stands up to test Jesus. He asks him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, always one to answer a question with a question, asks the lawyer, "What does the Law say?"

The lawyer responds with the two most important commandments in the Law. He has been listening to Jesus. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says, "That's the right answer. If you do that, you will live."

These two commands are about loving relationships. A loving relationship with God, and a loving relationship with your neighbors. "If you do that, you will live."

The lawyer, though, is concerned about being right, and he is concerned about looking wise in front of the people who are there. He asks Jesus an important question. "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus tells the story of the businessman who was driving down I-71 from Cleveland to Columbus, and his car broke down. Some dishonest folks stopped to quote-unquote "help him." They robbed him, beat him up, and left him lying in his broken-down car by the side of the road.

Now a minister was driving by and saw the man on the side of the road. But the minister was concerned about being late for an important Presbytery meeting. He

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<sup>2</sup> Not the Sinner's Prayer, but that's another sermon.

thought to himself, "I'm sure somebody will stop and help that poor guy." So, he just drove on by.

An elder of the church was driving by and saw the man on the side of the road. But the elder was on her way to plan a fund-raising dinner. She thought to herself, "Someone will stop." So, she drove on by.

Someone stopped. I want you to close your eyes and think of the last person on earth whom you would want to stop and help you.

Do you have that person in mind? Good.

That's who stopped to help this guy. This person saw what had happened to this man, and it moved them to tears. They stopped. They did first aid. They took the businessman to the hospital. They called Triple-A and arranged for his car to be fixed and taken there, too. They said to the emergency department people, "Here's two hundred dollars. If he owes more than that and he can't pay, send me the bill. I'll get it paid."

When they were done with all this, they looked at the clock on the wall behind the Registration Desk, and realized that their day was just about gone. They had missed their appointments and everything that they had planned to do that day.

They shrugged and went on.<sup>3</sup>

"Who," Jesus asks, "was the businessman's neighbor?"

The lawyer is forced to admit, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus says, "Go and do likewise."

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrase of the story of the Good Samaritan is mine, but inspired by Clarence Jordan's "Cotton Patch Gospel" version.

The minister's Presbytery meeting was a good thing, and an important thing. Your elders will tell you that I very rarely miss them myself, and I always try to make sure that we have an elder there, as well.

The elder's fund-raising dinner was a good thing, and an important thing. In a world where money seems to be required to make things happen, there is always a need for money for God's work in the world.

The work that Martha was doing was a good thing, and it was an important thing, or many important things. Hospitality is a way that we extend the love and grace of God in this world.

Helping the businessman in need was a good thing, and it was an important thing. Without help right then he could have died, or, certainly, had more bad things happen to him.

Listening to every word that Jesus said was a good thing, and an important thing. This was God, sitting in their living room. Every word that he said was important.

The hard choices that we have to make in our lives are not between good things and bad things. That's easy. It's choosing between good things and between important things that is difficult, and important.

Our Gospel reading this morning opens with the guide to how to do this. As Christians, we are called to make all our important decisions in the light of two relationships. Our relationship with God, and our relationships with our neighbors.

Each of us is both Mary and Martha. We are each the minister, and the elder, and the person who stopped. We have to make our decisions go back to what is best, and what is most important to God and to our neighbors' well-being.

The minister in the story was more concerned with the earthly business of the Presbytery, and, perhaps, with his own reputation, than he was with helping his neighbor who desperately needed help. Given the choice, he did good things, but not the most important good thing. He missed the better part.

The elder was more concerned with planning the dinner than she was with helping her neighbor who desperately needed help. Given the choice, she did good things, but not the most important good thing. She missed the better part.

Martha was more concerned about making sure that every detail was right for Jesus to stay in their house than she was about listening to what Jesus said. Given the choice, she did good things, but not the most important good thing. She, too, missed the better part.

Choosing the better part is about making our decisions in light of those two key relationships. Love God, love our neighbors.

That means that we will have to, from time to time, say, "No" to something to whom we would normally say, "Yes," because something else is, ultimately, more important. And that is OK. That is not only OK, that is what has to be OK.

As we make decisions in our lives this week, and for the rest of our lives on Earth, I pray that all of us would choose the better part.

AMEN.