

## **The Unjust Jesus**

Luke 10:38-42

Most of us have been asked to do something at some point in time that we considered beneath us; definitely not in the job description. Like, for instance, the pizza delivery guy who was asked, not simply to get a pizza there on time and hot, but to knock three times, then yell like a Wookiee, knock twice and make clicking alien noises, and after knocking a final three times, yell Plankton. And wear lingerie.

I don't know if Jesus was ever asked to do anything quite that outrageous, but every now and then something came up that wasn't in the job description. For instance, here Jesus is, the Messiah, savior of the world, a teacher and healer unlike anything the world has ever seen, and not just once, but on several occasions he finds himself being asked to referee family disputes; a 1<sup>st</sup> century Dr. Phil. In a few weeks we will hear the story of a man who comes to Jesus, not to find out what he has to do to be saved, or for help with his prayer life, but because he wants Jesus to make his brother split his inheritance with him. On another occasion the mother of James and John – who are grown men I might add – pulls Jesus aside to put in a plug for her two boys. She wants to be sure Jesus understands that her guys are just so much more special than those other ten louts who call themselves disciples that they deserve special recognition and honor up in heaven- trophies or special seats next to God or something. We can only hope that James and John were totally mortified by mom's shameless plug.

And then there was this little episode with sisters Mary and Martha, which, mercifully, doesn't end in a Geraldo-style chick fight, although Martha seems to be itching for one. Unlike John's gospel, which tells us more about them and their friendship with Jesus, this is their one and only appearance in Luke's gospel, and unfortunately, for Martha at least, it isn't a very flattering one.

For such a short, simple story, it's been misinterpreted in a wide variety of ways. A few scholars have taken it as a radical feminist treatise, elevating Mary in her atypical role as a disciple, while Martha gets put down for conforming to her traditional gender role. Others have written about Mary and Martha as representative of two distinct and opposing ways of living out discipleship, one contemplative and the other service-oriented, and still others have taken that one step further and suggested that Jesus is holding up the contemplative life over a life of service.

But you and I know better. Hospitality is certainly raised up as a Christian virtue throughout the New Testament, all of scripture, actually, and there are numerous other places in Luke where people are commended for their service to Jesus. And as to the idea that Jesus is plugging the contemplative life, it is hard to love and serve your neighbor when you are locked away from the world in prayer all day.

Two things Jesus says give us clues as to what the real point of the story is: The first is that he tells Martha that she is distracted, twice, in fact. And then at the end he tells her that Mary has chosen “the better part.” And again, even with just those two clues the temptation is still there to jump to the conclusion that Martha was distracted with her busywork and missed the opportunity to sit at Jesus’ feet and learn from him. But it isn’t her bustling about in the kitchen that is distracting her. It’s the fact that her sister isn’t. They’ve invited Jesus, and presumably at least 12 other men, into their home, and there are things that need to be done. Martha’s got work to do. Food needs to be prepared and served. Drinks have to be poured, dishes need to be done. And if we are talking about at least 15 people in the house with no microwave or store-bought bread, or frozen foods, that’s no small task. She had to be hustling.

So, no, where Martha went wrong wasn’t her choice of activity that day, it was what she let creep into her head as she did her work. She brooded. She fretted. She obsessed. It wasn’t fair. She was working her rear-end off while Mary was just sitting on hers. And what made it worse was that Jesus seemed to sanction that injustice by allowing Mary to sit, and not shooing her off to help in the kitchen. What distracted Martha wasn’t her hospitality, it was her smoldering anger that someone else was getting off the hook easy, while she was being worked to the bone. And Jesus was completely okay with it.

My family would be glad to tell you about the similar episode I had this week, which in retrospect, I found highly ironic given that I was already working on this sermon. I won’t give you all the gory details so that you still have some modicum of respect for me later, but here’s how it started: I got up early one morning, spent two hours doing housework, then came into the church and worked an eight hour day and when I got home, the first thing out of my teenagers’ mouths was, “what’s for dinner?” Like I said, I won’t tell you what happened next because it wasn’t pretty.

I am forever grateful that Jesus’ scolds are always brief, and they are never intended to make you feel terrible about yourself. What they do instead is invite you to go home and ask yourself some questions; hard questions. Like the one

today's story prompts us to ask: how do I feel when I think about the work I do, and by 'work,' I mean anything and everything from doing the laundry to taking care of aging parents to being on a committee or serving at Melting Pot. How do you feel about it? Overwhelmed? Burdened? Mildly resentful? Boiling over with rage? Did I spend an hour cleaning up the church kitchen last week only to come back in a few days later and find that someone had dumped a bunch of stuff on the counter and left it there for someone else to deal with? Do I tithe, or give as much as I possibly can, and then feel irked that other people aren't pulling their weight? Have I led a group or taught a class for several years and harbor a secret resentment that I can't quit because no one else will step forward and take their turn?

Now, I will caution you that asking yourself that question isn't always a good gauge of how you are doing. You can't automatically congratulate yourself if you happen to feel very good about the work you do. It's possible that you are perfectly content because you aren't doing very much! Maybe you feel quite satisfied with giving just a wee bit, because really, you are only involved here Sunday mornings so you feel like that is your fair share of the budget. Or you don't have kids at home anymore, so you don't have any responsibility for the Christian Ed program. Maybe you took your turn, now it's someone else's.

So here is another question Jesus would probably have us ask ourselves: why are you doing whatever it is that you are doing? Why are you teaching, or cleaning the kitchen after supper here, or tithing? Why are you doing your family's laundry and making them supper?

There are probably a lot of answers floating around out there, but here's the best one: you are doing it to serve Jesus. You are doing it out of love. You are doing it to love and serve your neighbor, and to show your devotion and gratitude to God. You are doing it because loving and serving God gives you joy.

What happened to Martha and to me is that we lost our focus. We lost sight of why we were doing what we were doing, and really, that it was God who gave us our work to begin with. And the minute our eyes left God, we noticed how hard the work was and how terribly unfair it was that other people got better jobs than we did, or easier lives, or lighter burdens. They got more glory and recognition for the work they did. And that's when the whining and misery began.

There is a prayer in my devotional guide that always gets my attention. The book follows the Christian year so it always comes in the middle of June, about the time

that I am congratulating myself for making it through Lent and Easter and Pentecost, confirmation on years when we have a class, and I look forward to what I feel is a well-deserved quiet summer. A break from all my hard work. And then I get to this prayer and find myself forced to pray that “our work may not be to us a burden, but a delight; and give us such love for thee as may sweeten all our obedience. Help us that we may serve thee with the cheerfulness and gladness of children.” Our work, whatever it may be, shouldn’t be a burden, but a delight! I always forget that, don’t you?

Mother Teresa always said that she saw the face of God in the sick and the dying and the poorest of the poor. She did her work because God gave it to her, because she was loving God in loving her neighbor, but also because it was in her work that she experienced God and saw God. We always think that it will be in lofty and glorious worship that we come nearest to God, but actually, it is in our work. Mopping, folding yet another load of laundry, looking after little ones, teaching Sunday School, year after year after year, pulling weeds around the church. It is in the littlest, most mundane things that we serve God, at least if we are serving with gladness and cheerfulness.

I wonder how that might transform our communal life, pausing from time to time to ask ourselves that question: how are we feeling about the work we are doing? How are we feeling about our work of nurturing the faith of our young disciples? How about our conversations about money, how we are giving it, and how we are using it? How are we feeling about the work of looking after the physical plant? Our potluck meals and other fellowship opportunities? How are we feeling about the work we are currently involved in personally here?

If we are feeling good, great! – as long as the reason we are happy with it isn’t that it doesn’t ask much of us or tie us down much. But what if we are feeling overwhelmed, or burdened, or bored, or burned out? What if there is an undercurrent of fear or anxiety beneath some of it, as in, ‘if we don’t have more money coming in we are going to be in trouble’ or ‘we just can’t get enough people to help with such-and-such a project,’ or other such fears?

Then maybe it’s time to refocus. Maybe it’s time to remember that we are doing this for God, that all of this, even the most mundane of tasks, is a service and act of devotion to God. Maybe it’s time to pray a prayer like the one I get each morning for a week in June, that our work would not be a burden, but a delight, and that we would do it with the cheerfulness and gladness of children. Can you even begin to imagine what that might look like around here, if we ate and worshipped and

cleaned and taught and gave as though it were all a delight? As if God were present in every moment of it? Can you begin to imagine how that might transform your life? Our life here at the church?

It's not a bad idea to stop every now and then and remind ourselves that work is not a bad thing, and that work is God-given. In a day when we have more leisure time than at any other point in history, and still we want more, we almost have to make it a discipline to tell ourselves that work isn't a dirty word. In our work we serve God, love God, and experience God. It is a labor of love.

The 'better part' isn't sitting and doing nothing, letting someone else do all the work. It isn't even focusing all your attention on praying and studying. The 'better part' is focusing your attention on God, whatever it is that you are doing. Praying, playing, even working. As the writer of Colossians advised his church, 'whatever you do, in word or deed, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'