

Mary's Heart, Martha's Hands

Luke 10:38-42

Southside Church of the Nazarene

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Pastor Doug Herbert

Introduction: busyness kills

- last week we had an extended look at the way busyness ruins our lives, killing the roots of our compassion and our ability to think clearly.
- It was a call to embrace the merciful gift of Sabbath which God has given us in order to stop that ruination.
- Afterward, someone asked me: so what are the kinds of things that we can do on the Sabbath to make it a day of rest? How should we keep the Sabbath?

Well, making up lists of rules is definitely not the answer!

The temptation is to lay out a whole bunch of guidelines for what we should and shouldn't do on this one day, in order to ensure that we're "doing Sabbath" right! The problem with that is that it leads quickly and almost unerringly to another mistake, and that is legalism. We saw the ugly effects of legalism in last week's Scripture story, where the Pharisees were so upset with Jesus for breaking one of their Sabbath rules that they went out and began plotting his death! And what was his deadly sin? He had the audacity to actually HEAL someone on the Sabbath!

You see, legalism, rule-making, has the effect of making people lose all perspective on things. *How twisted* is the thinking which decides that it's not alright to heal someone's body on the Sabbath, but it is alright to plot the murder of one who does!

Every time we get serious about Sabbath, it seems, we start coming up with rules. And before we know it, we are caught up in a tangle of rules and orders and smug, condescending comparisons with others. The subject of Sabbath somehow tempts us toward the practice of making many rules.

But then there's Jesus: "Jesus broke virtually all the Pharisees' Sabbath rules. He blew them over like card houses, dismissed them as man-made claptrap. Jesus provoked his opponents as much by his aloofness as by his defiance: he just didn't

seem to care that they had worked so hard on their code books, on the intricacies of policy and etiquette, on spelling out in infinite and infinitesimal fine print dos and don'ts by the armloads. One minute, Jesus seemed to break their rules as an impish prank, a way of getting their goat, and the next as a holy crusade, a full assault on their arrogant presumption" (Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God*, 109).

So you have to wonder, does God have any rules about Sabbath, or did we make them all up ourselves?

Actually, God Himself lays out very few rules for Sabbath observance

In reality, the Bible's prescriptions for the Sabbath are quite broad and general. It teaches us about how to keep the Sabbath holy, how to negotiate this rhythm between work and rest, more by telling stories than by laying down rules and regulations.

For instance, there's a story in Numbers 15 about a man who is caught breaking the Sabbath. He is found outside the camp gathering brushwood on the holy day of rest. The people who find him bring him before Moses and Aaron for a decision on what to do, and when Moses asks the Lord about it, God prescribes the death penalty. The man is taken outside the camp and stoned to death by the whole community.

So, what are we to make of this? Does it mean that God desires the death of those who work on the Sabbath? Certainly not according to Jesus, who claims authority to be "Lord of the Sabbath"! In the story we looked at last week, He had no problem with the fact that his disciples were threshing grain and eating it as they walked through the fields on a Sabbath day; nor did He tell the man with the withered hand in the synagogue to come to where he was staying the next day, or even after sundown that evening, so he could heal his hand then.

Both threshing the grain and healing the hand were defined as work by Jesus' community, but He did them anyway. Actually, the story of the stoning of the man who gathered brushwood was almost certainly the proof-text the Pharisees had in mind when they plotted to put Jesus to death after He healed the man's hand!

I think what this Old Testament story is teaching us is that not knowing how to quit work, being inwardly compelled to keep working all the time, is a way of life that kills. And we have all the evidence we should ever need, that anxiety and stress are huge killers! Mark Buchanan writes, “It’s killing us, our worry, our hurry, our need to gather one more armload of brushwood. . . We take our rat poison to thin our blood clots and scurry back to the rat race to clot our blood some more. The death verdict is inscribed in this way of life” (*The Rest of God*, 110).

God is warning us that our obsession with work, with getting ahead, is destructive to our very life. Yet He will not lay out for us minutely detailed instructions on what it means to remember the Sabbath – only general guidelines such as “rest, cease from work, celebrate, remember, observe, deny yourself, delight yourself.”

“Sabbath-keeping is more art than science. It is more poetry than arithmetic. It is something we get a knack for more than memorize procedures about” (ibid., 111).

I think that is what Isaiah is getting at when he relates to us this message he has heard from God:

"If you watch your step on the Sabbath
and don't use my holy day for personal advantage,
If you treat the Sabbath as a day of joy,
God's holy day as a celebration,
If you honor it by refusing 'business as usual,'
making money, running here and there—
Then you'll be free to enjoy God!
Oh, I'll make you ride high and soar above it all.
I'll make you feast on the inheritance of your ancestor Jacob."
Yes! God says so! (58: 13-14, *The Message*)

Don't use my holy day for personal advantage. Or, as another translation puts it, keep “from doing as you please on my holy day.” “If you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words.”

This is not a prohibition against doing anything that gives us pleasure. It is not telling us that it's wrong to smile or enjoy ourselves on Sunday! Rather, it is a

warning directed to people who “have made the gratification of their desires the most important thing in their lives. Their religion has been for the purpose of self-gratification.” And God says “that if they will surrender their desires to him, and let their ethical behavior and their ceremonial behavior be dominated by self-forgetfulness, they will find him, they will experience the exaltation of being partners with him” (J.N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 509).

Clearly, God does not want our work to dominate our lives, leaving us frustrated and anxious.

Which brings us to the story which I’d like to look at a bit more closely. You’ll find it in Luke 10:38-42.

38 As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to what he taught. 40 But Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, “Lord, doesn’t it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me.”

41 But the Lord said to her, “My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! 42 There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Now, this is not a story which takes place on the Sabbath, as far as we know. But it’s important to see that Sabbath-keeping has to do with much more than just what we do or don’t do on a single day of the week. It has to do with our whole lives – the rhythm of work and rest that needs to pervade every day. So this is a story which teaches us about Sabbath rest too.

Mark Buchanan:

“Martha is all in a flap over what she sees as Mary’s laziness. Mary sits attentive at Jesus’s feet, while Martha wrestles the crockery, thickens the sauce, bastes the lamp chops, sets the table. Mary is oblivious, dreamy and serene, even though Martha is sending up smoke signals thick and menacing. She places the tableware with an emphatic *clunk*. She raps the ladle on the pot’s edge hard as a blacksmith nailing horseshoes. She sighs with a hiss like fire brazing water. Still Mary doesn’t notice.

So the lid finally boils over. Martha vents her frustration on both Jesus and Mary: 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'" (119)

How many of you have ever been where Martha is? You've got a project you're working on, and there's a deadline approaching; you've got a plan which definitely involves someone else helping you, but they just don't seem to have gotten the picture; they're preoccupied with something else. The longer it goes on like that, the hotter your blood boils! It's just not fair!

Furthermore, it's work that's being done for the Lord! She's cooking this meal in His honor, and that makes it all the more important. Everything has to be just right for such an important guest as Him. You have to put out your very best effort when it's Jesus you're working for! There's no time for sitting around and visiting or just listening when we've got a big religious project going on, right?

Well, at least that's what our demon tells us – the demon of busyness. The demon whose role is to keep us so distracted or disturbed, so convinced of the value of constant activity, that we remain deaf to the "still, small voice" of our Lord. Martha is so taken up with the work she's doing for the Lord, she not only scolds her sister who is failing to help her, but even goes so far as to scold Jesus himself, for not making Mary "get busy!"

But Jesus is not very sympathetic to Martha's cause, is he? In fact, he gently chides her for being "worried and upset about many things."

Many things. Isn't that just exactly the way we feel much of the time, harassed and chased as we are by our taskmasters, whether internal or external? We are worried and upset about many things when we are under the influence of the demon of busyness. And Jesus insightfully points out our problem, and he gently corrects us:

Did I not tell you that if you would come and learn from me, you would find rest for your souls? Did I not offer you peace that the world cannot give? Why are you letting yourself be worried and upset about all these things?

But what is the solution?

God-honoring work stems from and is guided by our trusting, listening, attentive rest.

For the answer to that question, Jesus points Martha to the very object of her frustration and tells her to take a fresh look at Mary! Mary has been sitting at Jesus' feet, listening as he taught.

"She's not lazy, Martha; she's listening. You are worried and upset about all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."

What is this one and only thing that is worth being concerned about? Do you know what it is? Think about what the Bible says is essential to human life:

- what did Jesus tell the devil when he was tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread? "Man does not live by bread alone, but by . . ." what? Yes, ". . . every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord"!
- and what did Jesus tell His followers to seek above all – with the promise that they would then find their everyday human concerns would be met? The kingdom of God – that is, His active, personal **rule** – and His righteousness: the **relationship** with Him that He alone makes possible!

Isn't that interesting? Did you know that your ministry for the Lord is not as important to Him as the practice of carefully listening to Him? Did you know that nothing we can ever do for him takes the place of the need to simply sit at His feet and listen? And nothing we do, no ministry we undertake in His Name, can ever be anything but barren and sterile human striving unless it arises out of the kind of communion that takes place when we rest in the Lord's presence and just listen.

One commentator puts it this way: "What we . . . learn here is . . . that we should not busy ourselves to such an extent with outward things that we neglect the quiet worship of the Lord. The most important part of our [faith] is the spiritual exercise of communion with our Redeemer. When things are right in this respect, we shall also in our practical life be actively busy in His honor. It is certainly one of the most difficult lessons to learn, to maintain the right balance between the life of quiet worship in spirit and in truth and the practicing of our [faith] in active service" (Geldenhuys, NICNT on Luke, 316f).

So, keep in mind that what we're talking about here is the need for a rhythm, a balance. Jesus gently chides Martha here for her over-zealous activism which has hindered her ability to hear His word; but we should not think that He would commend Mary if she never did anything but sit at His feet. Jesus' word culminates in commands which often send obedient disciples forth in active service and ministry. You certainly don't have to look far to see that. But this morning the word is challenging us, not to **do more** but to **listen better**.

It's not that Jesus approves of contemplation and disapproves of action! Rather, he teaches us to live with an appropriate balance: "Martha's industry joined to Mary's attentiveness. Martha's briskness and energy and diligence stemming from Mary's quietness and restfulness and vigilance. The best is to have Martha's hands and Mary's heart" (Buchanan, 119).

Hmmm. Martha's hands and Mary's heart. I like that. I think that's right on the money. But let's keep in mind that Martha's hands can only do what is truly useful and truly helpful, if they are guided by Mary's heart!

Back a few years ago, Larnelle Harris recorded a song that made a big impact on me, and I was thinking about it again as I prepared this message. It's called "I Miss My Time with You," and it goes like this:

There he was just waiting,
in our old familiar place:
an empty spot beside him,
where once i used to wait
to be filled with strength and wisdom
for the battles of the day.
i would have passed him by again
but I clearly heard him say:

(chorus)

i miss my time with you
those moments together
i need to be with you each day
and it hurts me when you say
you're too busy

busy trying to serve me
but how can you serve me
when your spirit's empty?
there's a longing in my heart
wanting more than just a part of you
it's true
i miss my time with you

what do i have to offer
how can i truly care
my efforts have no meaning
when your presence isn't there
but you will provide the power
if i take the time to pray
i'll stay right here beside You
and you'll never have to say... (repeat chorus)

This morning I read in my personal worship time, "The key to every person lies in someone else. You are spiritually responsible for some other person or persons, and your obedience to the Lord Jesus will enable those people to obey. If you want your neighbor to come to know Christ, you have to start allowing Christ to work in your own life so that out of your clean heart he can draw your neighbor to himself. . . . [T]he mark of the truly sanctified heart is that it cares more about another's salvation than it does about its own well-being" (Dennis Kinlaw, *This Day with the Master*, September 2).

That's a transformation that can only come about through listening to Jesus and letting him have His way with you. My brothers and sisters, God wants to use you and me to impact this world with His Good News. And in order to do that, today Jesus is calling you and me to have Mary's heart. "Mary has chosen what is best."

Will you?