

“Listening”

Luke 10: 38-42

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Brentwood First Presbyterian

Mike Magee

A clash of temperaments

Have you read or heard of the book, Men are from Mars, and Women are from Venus? The thesis of the author is that men and women think differently, and when we are aware of the difference, we can finally get along with the other gender. Of course, this gets blurred because some men think like the author's stereotypic woman and some women think like the author's stereotyped men. Then there is the Myers Briggs, which classifies everyone into a binary in four categories. The first category is as either an extrovert or an introvert. The second category is as a “paralysis by analysis person” or an intuitive “don't bother me with the facts” person. The third category is as a thinker or a feeler. You know these folks by how they express themselves or how they ask you to express yourself. They ask you how you feel and they tell you how they feel. Or they ask you what you think and tell you what they think. The fourth category is a person most comfortable before a decision has been made, vs a person most comfortable after a decision has been made. Extrovert or introvert. Analyst or intuitive. Thinker or feeler. Perceiver or decision maker. It has been said that opposites attract. This is good, because in a household raising children, or in the work environment, or in a church, nothing would get done if everyone was alike. It truly takes all types.

Sometimes it is fun to figure out how people would test out if they took the Myers Briggs. It is obvious here that Martha and Mary have different temperaments. I would say Martha is an extraverted, analytical, thinking, decision maker. And I would say Mary is an introverted, intuitive, feeling, person not comfortable with decisions. And yet they are sisters living in the same house.

The Marthas of our world may pray a short prayer while on the run:

*Lord of all pots and pans and things
Since I've no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things
Or watching late with thee
Or dreaming in the dawnlight
Or storming heaven's gates
Make me a saint by getting meals*

And washing up the plates

In case you are wondering, no, I did not write that poem!

While the Marthas of our world are busy in the metaphorical kitchens, the Marys of our world take long walks, spend their time reading the Bible, and do a lot of sitting with folded hands and praying long prayers. The Marthas say the Marys are lazy pew potatoes. The Marys say the Marthas are programming us to death. But Jesus says both are needed in the church.

If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether. If we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. So if we ask Jesus who is the best model for us, Martha and the Good Samaritan on the one hand, or Mary on the other, Jesus would probably say, yes.

A church will fold if everyone was a Martha, or if everyone was a Mary. A church needs both temperaments.

The other person's needs sometimes are for us to serve by doing and sometimes for us to serve by listening

I am going to read to you the lyrics of a song you know. I am going to ask you not to glaze over because you have heard it before. I want you to really listen.

*A child arrived just the other day,
He came to the world in the usual way.
But there were planes to catch, and bills to pay.
He learned to walk while I was away.
And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew,
He'd say, "I'm gonna be like you, dad.
You know I'm gonna be like you."*

*And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you coming home, dad?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then.
You know we'll have a good time then."*

*My son turned ten just the other day.
He said, "Thanks for the ball, dad, come on let's play.
Can you teach me to throw?" I said, "Not today,
I got a lot to do." He said, "That's ok."
And he walked away, but his smile never dimmed,
Said, "I'm gonna be like him, yeah.
You know I'm gonna be like him."*

*"When you coming home, dad?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then.
You know we'll have a good time then."*

*Well, he came from college just the other day,
So much like a man I just had to say,
"Son, I'm proud of you. Can you sit for a while?"
He shook his head, and he said with a smile,
"What I'd really like, dad, is to borrow the car keys.
See you later. Can I have them please?"*

*"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then, dad.
You know we'll have a good time then."*

*I've long since retired and my son's moved away.
I called him up just the other day.
I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind."
He said, "I'd love to, dad, if I could find the time.
You see, my new job's a hassle, and the kid's got the flu,
But it's sure nice talking to you, dad.
It's been sure nice talking to you."
And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me,
He'd grown up just like me.
My boy was just like me.*

*And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then, dad.
You know we'll have a good time then."*

Harry Chapin's song is immortal, and is a favorite for Father's Day messages.

In today's gospel lesson maybe Jesus needs somebody to listen. Remember, he is 100% God, but also 100% human. He has just begun his journey to Jerusalem where he knows he will travel the bitter road of the cross and he will experience the loneliness of being denied, abandoned, and betrayed by his disciples.

Martha may think her tasks have a high level of importance, and at another time she would be right, but not now. Now, it is time to sit and listen. Mary gets this. Martha doesn't. The story of Martha and Mary is not complete without the story of the Good Samaritan. To the lawyer who asked what was required, Jesus said, go and do. But to Martha, he said sit down, and listen. The life of a disciple requires

both. The other person's needs sometimes are for us to serve by doing and sometimes for us to serve by listening

Our own needs are sometimes to do and sometimes to listen

At the moment when Martha needed most to stop and put down her cares and concerns she did not. So she missed the greatest moment of her life. Why? Because of the turkey in the oven. Martha is not on the verge of burn out. She already is burned out. Externally she was whining about her sister not helping her. Internally she was asking herself why was she working so hard when others didn't. Martha needs to take a Sabbath. She might even need to get away for the whole weekend. Or maybe even take one of those week-long retreats away at a monastery, where you are quiet for the whole week.

Again, we understand this story more fully by considering the story of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer who asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?", is full of himself, but is keeping his light hidden. The lawyer needs outward focus. Martha's candle is almost out, and is griping about how she does all the work while her sister goofs off. Martha needs inward spiritual strength.

It is not an accident that the parable of the Good Samaritan precedes the story of Martha and Mary. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we learn that Jesus wants us to be outwardly focused. But in the story of Martha and Mary, I believe we hear Jesus saying he first wants us to get our own house in order, before we start working on other's houses. He wants us first to be inwardly strong. Otherwise we quickly reach burnout. Because busyness distracts and frazzles us from the reason for our outward focus. Inwardly strong first, THEN outwardly focused.

On my first visit to Tamariz in Guatemala two years ago, we got a lot done. We built a house for the pastor, which was hard work. But the only time I felt like I personally connected with the Kekchi, the descendents of the Mayans, was when they were making fun of my lack of carpentry skills. I enjoyed hearing and seeing them laugh. But I had no conversations with them, partially because of the language barrier, and partially because I was too much of a Martha.

Our second and third annual visits, I grabbed interpreters and made time to be a Mary. Those visits were much more enriching for me spiritually.

There is Jose, our van driver. He is Quiche. Through a translator, he tells us of his father abusing him as a child, and his struggles to overcome this. This man with a third grade education tells us he realizes he does not have to treat his children the way he was treated. That he CAN break the cycle. He can be a better father. He had never told anyone this before. This story deeply affected us. All we had to do was listen.

Then there is the grieving sister. She takes her 19 year old VBS director from our team by the hand after VBS is finished for the day, about a half mile down a dirt path. To a thatch roof one room hut with a dirt floor. A dead 12 year old boy is being wrapped with linen. On questioning the Kekchi, I believe he died of a brain abscess, probably due to contaminated water. Something he would not have had in the US. All of us wanted to pay for the funeral. But the 19 year old asked the translator what we can do for the mother. The translator said the mother has no picture with which to remember her son. One of our team had taken pictures the previous year. The translator looked through them and found one of the grieving mother and her son who was healthy the year before. Another story that deeply affected us. All we had to do was listen.

Then there is the story of Patrocinia. Patrocinia is the president of the Presbyterian women for the Presbytery of the Mayan Peten. She is Kekchi. She is a health promoter, which is sort of like a physician's assistant, only with but a third grade education. Under the direction of two western trained family practice physicians, she provides health care for a lot of folks in northern Guatemala. We included her through a Spanish to English translator in a devotional on the last few verses of Romans chapter 8. The ones about how nothing can come between us and God's love. I confessed there had been times in my own life many years ago that I wondered where was God in illness and tragedy, but that now I realized God is always present. Patrocinia, who has seen many more tragic and helpless situations than even I as an oncologist, said she has never felt that God has abandoned her. Yet another story that still deeply affects us. And all we had to do was listen.

Our own needs are sometimes to do and sometimes to listen.

Conclusion

Is this a story of a clash of temperaments? Or is Jesus telling us that in every season of our lives we need to stop and listen. Listen to what others need of us. Listen to what we need. Sometimes after we listen we need to be busy to help other folks. Sometimes we need to be busy to keep ourselves occupied. Sometimes we need to listen for the sake of others. And sometimes, just sometimes we need to listen for our own sake.

Praise be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say...