

## **Taking Flight by Listening**-12 August, 2007

*Luke 10:38-42*

One of the many blessings of living in a rural area, as we do, is that we can observe the natural world around us, especially the animals. Right outside our large window is an area that some would call overgrown (if they were being polite). I call it habitat. From our living room window, I can watch chipmunks, squirrels, a woodchuck that lives under the woodpile and all different species of birds; humming birds, woodpeckers, finches and wrens. Each spring, there are young robins, not newly hatched, but those not yet grown to maturity. They still have a lot of growing up to do. One day, the mother robin will give them a little nudge when they are on the edge of the nest, and down they come. The little robins can hop around on the ground. It still depends on its mother to bring it food, instead of finding worms for itself. And it still needed to learn to fly. It is vital for them to learn how to fly. If they do not learn to fly, they would not be able to get back to the safety of the nest. If they do not learn to fly, they will not be able to travel very far in search of food. If that little robin did not learn to fly, and learn quickly, it would be easy prey for predators. That bird's life depends on learning how to flap both wings so it will be able to soar above any danger.

Similarly, if we want to soar spiritually, we need to learn how to fly with Jesus Christ. In other words, in order to be followers of Jesus, we need to learn how to live a Christian life.

Jesus understood that. That is why his disciples traveled with him. Disciple means "learner," and Jesus helped his followers learn the way of life he wanted for them. The disciples worked with him as he healed the sick, as he fed the hungry, as he loved the unloved, and as he forgave those who had a difficult time forgiving themselves. His

disciples also listened to him as he preached to large crowds of people. They listened as he told stories to tell us just how much God loves us. They listened as he interacted with all kinds of people, from the rich and powerful to the poor and powerless and to everyone in between.

Jesus asked his disciples to follow him so that they could learn how to live and love as He lived and loved. They were not going to learn that lesson from reading a textbook. They were only going to learn it by living with Jesus and with their fellow disciples.

As Mark read for us this morning, Luke 10 recounts a time when a woman named Martha opened her home to Jesus. Martha had a sister, Mary, but it was Martha who seemed to be doing all the work. Martha was busy making sure that Jesus' stay was just right.

What would you do if you found out Jesus were coming to your house?

What would you serve him for dinner?

No doubt Martha had scrubbed the walls, and swept the floor, and made the beds. She probably made sure there was a clean tablecloth on the table and maybe even fresh flowers in a vase. After all that work, the house was "perfect".

Then Martha busied herself preparing for dinner. Martha did not live in our day of refrigerators and microwave ovens. Cooking a meal was hard work. It could take hours to prepare even a relatively simple meal. And, from what we can tell, Martha was probably not preparing a simple meal. After all, Jesus was to be a guest in her home. She wanted to do it up right.

While Martha toiled away in the kitchen, her sister Mary was in the living room sitting at Jesus' feet. She listened as he told stories. Perhaps he told her about his

travels. Perhaps she pondered his words of wisdom. Perhaps she thought about ways to live by his teachings. Perhaps she simply enjoyed being in his presence. What is certain is that she stayed focused on Jesus while Martha was focused on the task at hand.

As you can guess, Martha was more than a little annoyed with her sister. Just imagine what she was thinking: It just was not right that Mary was out there with Jesus, while I'm in the kitchen with all the pots and pans. It just was not right that Martha was doing all the work, while Mary sat back and enjoyed herself. After all, what would happen if Martha decided to be like Mary? What if neither one of them did any work? Would the house ever be clean? Would they ever eat dinner?

The more Martha stewed about it, the more upset she became. Just picture her in the kitchen, banging pots and pans and clearing her throat so that Mary would get the hint and come to help. But Mary stayed right where she was, at Jesus' feet.

Finally, Martha could not take it any longer. She marched out of the kitchen and exploded (Luke 10:38-40). *"Lord, don't care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*

Martha was doing all that work in order to be a good hostess and to make Jesus comfortable. But instead of making Jesus comfortable, she placed him in the middle of a family fight. It seems as though Martha was so caught up in all her work that she forgot why she was working so hard in the first place.

Martha hoped Jesus would tell Mary to help her. She was convinced that Mary's priorities were messed up, and she wanted Jesus to straighten her out. OUCH! WAS Martha surprised by his response! (10:41-42). **"Martha, Martha,"**

the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Jesus pointed out that it was Martha who was in need of correction, not Mary. Mary had made the right choice. She chose to sit at Jesus' feet. She chose to be in his presence. She chose to listen to him. And that was the better part.

### At Odds

What was going on inside Martha and Mary's home? This incident seems so at odds with much of what Jesus said at other times. He often ended his parables with the words, "Go and do likewise." But here, the heroine was Mary, who was sitting at Jesus' feet while her sister did all the work. If we all lived like Mary, nothing would ever get done. We need to work. We need to take care of our families. We need to concern ourselves with dozens of other priorities. Is Jesus telling us to sit around and do nothing all day?

To fully understand the significance of what Jesus said to Martha and Mary, we need to remember that this is not an isolated episode. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary comes just after the parable of the Good Samaritan. The two belong together, for together they illustrate the two essentials of the Christian life.

Jesus told this famous parable (Luke 10:25-27), after an expert in Jewish Law asked, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Because he was an expert in the law, he already knew the answer. After Jesus asked him his opinion, the expert told Jesus that the key to inheriting eternal life is to "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 neighbor as yourself"

(Luke 10: 25-27).

Jesus then told a story to explain what it means to love a neighbor (10: 30-37). To love your neighbor means to go and do like the Good Samaritan. To love your neighbor means to stop and help someone in need. To love your neighbor means to stop and help, even if the person in need does not live next door. To love your neighbor means to stop and help, even if the person in need does not look like you or speak like you or think like you or believe like you.

Luke placed the account of Jesus' stay with Martha and Mary right after that parable. The placement makes sense. Just as the parable of the Good Samaritan explains what it means to love our neighbor, so Jesus' stay with Martha and Mary explains what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

Martha was so busy doing things for Jesus, that she got distracted from what was really important: loving Jesus. Mary had her priorities straight. She knew it was most important to be in Jesus' presence, sitting at his feet, and listening to him.

Luke has placed an occasion where Jesus called for active engagement alongside a time when Jesus called for being still. Jesus was not making a choice between the two. He was not saying that it is good to be like the Samaritan, but it is better to be like Mary. Nor was he saying that what Mary did was fine, but that he would prefer his followers to be more like the Samaritan. Instead, both are essential for the Christian life. Both the Good Samaritan and Mary are models to follow. We can be actively engaged with human need, and we can also set aside time to be still. The Christian life is not an either/or proposition. The trick is discovering how to keep balance in our life.

## Keeping Balance

These two Scriptures give us insight into how we can keep balance between active engagement and contemplation.

Martha was so distracted by what she was doing that she forgot the reason she was doing it in the first place. She was working, and working hard, but she was out of focus. She forgot the "why" of what she was doing. She was too preoccupied, too busy, thought she had too much to do to spend time at Jesus' feet. Jesus may not have been criticizing her work ethic so much as her inability to remain focused on her purpose.

Sometimes we are like Martha. We get so distracted by what we are doing that we forget the reason we do anything at all. *What distracts you? When have you lost our focus?* We all work, and work hard, but we get out of focus. We have our jobs to think about. We have our families to take care of. We have yard work and housework to do. We have a million other responsibilities. How can we possibly take time to sit at Jesus' feet?

*How will you know when your life is out of balance?*

It is easy to become so preoccupied that we do not seek Christ's presence through prayer, in Bible study, or in worship. It is easy to believe we are too busy to listen and to learn what Christ is saying to us. It is easy to keep working and working, and forget why. In these times we can be so stressed that we snap. We may lash out at the people near us: our spouse, our children. Our parents, our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, our brother, or-like Martha-our sister.

It is a clear sign that we are out of balance when, like Martha, we attack the people we love. Lashing out is a signal that we desperately need to be still and know that

God is still God.

*What do you do to get your focus back?*

We need to listen to Jesus' words again. We need to learn from him. In fact, the busier we are, the more we need to sit at Jesus' feet.

The priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan were also out of balance. They were traveling along the road where the man attacked by robbers was dying. Both the priest and the Levite were religious people. They both knew the Scriptures. They both knew the law of God and the two-fold command to love God and neighbor. They both worshiped regularly. In fact, since they were on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, they might have been going to or coming from the Temple. We can also assume that they both prayed regularly.

Yet for all that contemplation and study, they did not stop to help someone in need. They failed to love their neighbor, and in failing to love their neighbor, they failed to love God.

This is the other side of the story of Mary and Martha. Listening leads to action. It is possible sit in church for worship every Sunday, to have a time of personal prayer every day, to read and study the Bible, and still pass by someone in need. We all feel our children (especially teenagers) have the market cornered when it comes to selective hearing. Selective hearing is a reality in adult lives also. It is turning the sound down during the evening news because we do not want to hear how other people need our love. It is failing to even recognize the needs of our neighbors around us. It is, in various ways, passing by on the other side.

We do need to listen as Mary did; we also need to act as the Samaritan did. Listening and acting need to live in harmony with one another.

We need to listen:

- To pay attention to God's Word as found in the Scriptures.
- To be part of a community of faith where we can grow in our faith.
- To have an active prayer life that balances speaking and remaining silent.
- To hear the words of others through reading and conversation.
- To pay attention to the voices of those crying out in need.

We also need to work:

- To be doers of the Word.
- To live out our faith at work, at home, and in our leisure time.
- To take time to care even when it is inconvenient to do so.
- To face the challenges of our community and realize that, even though we can't do everything and solve every problem [save the whole world], we can work on some smaller things and solve some little problems.

The priest and the Levite made the mistake of believing they could be sincere in their worship of God without doing the will of God. Martha made the mistake of trying to serve God without sitting at the feet of Jesus to listen and learn. *How many of us have made those same mistakes?*

For us to be faithful, we need both essentials of the Christian life. In order to soar spiritually, we need to listen to Jesus and flap both wings. We must take a flying lesson from that young robin. Flapping just one wing is not enough.

Please pray with me: "Loving God, you want us to get to know you. You invite us to have a relationship with you, to fall deeper and deeper in love with you. You know how easily we can be distracted. So many things compete for our attention that, at times, we lose focus on what is most important. Thank you for the witness of Martha and Mary. Help us listen for your voice as we reflect on their encounter with Jesus, so that we can soar to new heights with you. Teach us the way we should go, for to you we lift up our souls. Amen."