

“The Best Portion”

Luke 10:38-42

Scott B. Martin July 15, 2007

Today is the last story from chapter 10 of the Gospel of Luke. Luke crams an awful lot into this one chapter. He offers up great insights into who Jesus is and what he was about and how we as disciples of Christ are to act. If you recall the chapter began with Jesus sending out the 70 two by two to spread and reap the kingdom harvest. Then last Sunday we had the well known and much beloved Good Samaritan story, offering insights into “who is my neighbor,” who is in God’s good graces. Much of the emphasis of these first two stories seemed to be on hospitable action, on doing the will of God, rather than just saying the right things. Today’s concluding story seems to offer the exact opposite advice, stressing sitting at the feet of Jesus, over action. Jesus tells Mary she has chosen the “best portion.” How like the Bible to offer seemingly contradictory messages, only this time the contradiction seems to be within the very same chapter! Walking the walk or contemplating the Word? Which is it to be? What does Jesus mean by the “best portion?”

Part of the problem we have is the way we approach the Bible. We tend to read just one small story or section at a time. We tend to focus so hard on just that one small story that we fail to set it in context. We tend to read it in isolation, not laying it along side other stories in the Bible.

I’ve been reading one of the books I picked up at General Synod, Richard W. Swanson’s book, “Provoking the Gospel of Luke: A Storyteller’s Commentary Year C. In there, Swanson, who teaches at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, shares the insights one of

the students in his Introduction to the New Testament class shared. Having taught a New Testament Introductory course, I can tell you the students often had the same experience. Some stories in the gospel just don't seem to belong there; stories that include such sayings as "hate your father and mother," for instance. Then there are stories like the Good Samaritan and the one we have today, which are far more complicated and seemingly contradictory, than one might gather at first glance.

Being South Dakota it was not unusual for Swanson to have a student who was Native American. One day one of these students, whose name was Wade Lone Elk, came up to Swanson and said he had figured out the Gospel of Luke. Swanson even though he knew Wade was a very bright student found it hard to believe that he had Luke all figured out, after all, Swanson, who had been studying Luke for decades didn't think he had Luke all figured out. None the less Swanson was eager to hear what this bright student had to say

Wade Lone Elk said that the point of Luke's story was to "sit still and listen to grandfather." Swanson's reaction was probably like yours and mine. He needed a little more explanation than that!

Wade continued, "My grandfather is full-blooded Lakota. These Indian wannabes come to my grandfather and they want to learn how to be Indian. Grandfather just shakes his head and smiles.

All these Indian wannabes, they come, they ask my grandfather questions. We would never ask such questions. Grandfather will tell us when it is time.

But they come, and they ask questions, so Grandfather tells them a story. Grandfather, he's always telling stories.

These wannabes ask their questions, they hear a story, and they smile, shake Grandfather's hand, and get up and leave.

We would never leave after one story. Sometimes Grandfather tells another one. ... He's always telling stories.

Sometimes he tells the same story he just told, all the same words and everything, just tells it right away again a second time. We would never ask why, Grandfather will tell us when it is time.

Sometimes he tells a different story, just the exact opposite of the first story, right away, just the opposite. We would never ask why. Grandfather will tell us when it is time.

But these wannabes, they come, they ask their questions, they hear a story, they get up and leave, and they think they know what it means to be Indian.”

Wade was shaking his head all he was telling this. “They need to learn to sit still and listen to Grandfather.

That's what Luke is saying to the Gentiles, that they think they know what it means to be Jewish.”

Swanson for all the great scholars he had sat under, for all his degrees, had not heard such a penetrating insight into the deep deposits of Jewish tradition to be found in Luke, deposits that as he said, “most Gentiles do not even recognize.”

“Imagine the world in which Luke's story is first told. Sit still and listen to Grandfather.”, says Swanson

Jesus is walking the dusty roads of Palestine, spreading the Good News of the Gospel. When he and the disciples come to Bethany he is invited to stay at the house of Martha. It seems likely that Martha was a widow, for no husband is mentioned and she does have a house. It is also likely that she is

not well to do. There are no servants to help. What a thrill it must have been to have this well known rabbi, prophet, miracle worker staying in her humble home. Her neighbors would be talking for weeks!

If only she had known Jesus was coming! She could have cleaned the house properly, gotten in more food, food appropriate for such a guest. There were bound to be other people coming and going as well, as soon as they knew Jesus was there. Oh well, she would do the best she could possibly do, under the circumstances. Maybe the neighbors had some things she could borrow.... Her sister Mary could help. It was all well and good that she was entertaining their guest in the main room, but she could use her help in the kitchen. Mary could run around to the neighbors and get the things she needed.

Martha peeked around the corner for the umpteenth time and tried to get Mary's attention, but Mary was so fixated on Jesus that she didn't see Martha beckoning to her. Finally she could stand it no longer. Mary had her back to her and Jesus was facing her. **“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me all alone to do al the work? Tell her to help me.”**

As soon as she said she couldn't believe that she had spoken to Jesus that way, but really, all she was trying to do was be a good hostess and provide Jesus with a decent meal, worthy of such a guest.

Jesus looked at Martha with great tenderness. The kitchen was hot. A drop of sweat rolled down her forehead and splashed onto the hard packed dirt floor. **“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. Only one thing is important. Mary has chosen the better thing, and it will never be taken away from her.”**

Several things seem to stand out for me as I contemplate this scene. Jesus does NOT tell Martha she has chosen the wrong thing or a bad thing. She simply has not chosen the BEST thing.

Have you ever noticed on a buffet that the “best” items are usually far along the buffet. Those who arrange the buffet hope you will fill your plate with inexpensive items before you get to the better items, that way you won’t have too much room left when you get to them. You will have filled your plate with lettuce before you get to the asparagus! Well, the kingdom buffet is a bit like that. God has filled the world with lots of wonderful possibilities. All of them are good, but some are better than others!

I also can’t help but wonder if Jesus would have said such a thing to Martha if she had not tried to USE Jesus to get Mary to help her. I suspect that if Martha had quietly gone about her work, finding joy in preparing the food for Jesus, relishing her role hosting Jesus that Jesus would have been more than happy to let things stand as they were. It is only when Martha becomes filled with anxiety over her tasks and then lets that anxiety spill over onto Mary and even onto Jesus, that Jesus says what he does. Perhaps Martha’s anxiety has spoiled the role she was playing. We know that Jesus on other occasions advised us to “be not anxious about your life, what you shall eat, what you shall wear,…” Anxiety has a way of stealing the good from life and life’s tasks.

Well, we are beginning to run out of time for our worship this morning. I am beginning to get anxious about the time and so perhaps are some of you! Perhaps if we set aside our anxiety we have time for a final thought and a final story. There is something of Mary in Martha in all of us.

As you know every year for the past 12 years I’ve on the K-O Conference’s annual Esperanza Youth Mission trip to Tijuana, Mexico,

where, among other things, we help families there build decent houses for themselves and their neighbors.

This year we were to dig the foundation for a new house. This is the hardest part of the whole house building process. It involves digging a trench about 4-5 feet down and 18-24 inches wide all around the perimeter of the foundation. We have to do this by hand with picks and shovels in very dry, clay like soil, with hopefully not too many rocks, under a blazing sun. It is very hot, hard work.

The Esperanza staff and ourselves as leaders always stress that we are there not just to work building a house, we are also there to work at building relationships with the family whose house we are working on and others in the community. Often many of the neighborhood kids come to watch the “gringos” working in their neighborhood, an unusual site I’m sure. We stress over and over again that even if we let some of the physical house building work slide and remain undone to create time and opportunity to speak with and share with the family and people in the neighborhood, it is worth it. Sometimes it is a problem that volunteers show up all gung ho to build a house and they get so task orientated that they forget to take time for what I believe Jesus would say is the “Better part.” In part this is due to most of us not speaking Spanish and feeling perhaps out of place and anxious, as a result, so there is a tendency to “bury oneself in work.”

This year I was quite aware of the Martha and Mary inside of me. This year we had a smaller group and fewer adults. We also had very few males on this trip, only three out of the 14 who went. Now let me hasten to say the girls always work at least as hard as guys on these trips, often harder, but digging foundations is not the best job for them. It’s not the best job for many of the guys who have gone on the trip over the years! It is long, hard

and tedious. You wonder if you are ever going to get the hole deep enough and wide enough.

I found myself this year trying to get in touch with the Martha and Mary in me. Each day we would pull up in our vans, hop out, unload the tools, greet the family and jump in the trenches and start digging. Each day we would start strong but soon people slowed their work and started drifting away to play with the families children and neighborhood children. They would be quietly trying to talk to one another, asking each other's names, ages, all the questions you ask when you don't know the language well. They were playing Simon Says and Duck Duck, Goose and so forth.

Meanwhile I was picking and shoveling away in the trench and noticing how much "work" was left to do on the trench. Sometimes the Martha side of me got the best of me. I wanted to shout "Okay, lets get back to work and finish this trench! We've got a long way to go!"

This was realistic. It was honest. After all Esperanza does build houses! We had a family depending on us to help build their house. It's a good thing right? The shack this family was living in was right next to where we were digging. Yes, it was a very good thing to help them build a cement block house.

Then I looked over at the children, laughing and playing with our youth. I saw two of the youth talking with the mother who was cooking lunch for us. There wasn't really room enough in the trenches for everyone to swing pick axes and shovel dirt. Some of the youth, who were strangers to each other before this trip, were bending heavy wire and talking and smiling as they went.

The Mary side of me decided that they had chosen the "BEST PART." Yes, they will remember working on this house, but the stronger and more

important memories from this trip will come from playing with the children, talking with the family and sharing with each other, reflecting on all they had seen and heard on this mission trip.

With this Mary like reflection in mind I found myself enjoying my picking and shoveling much more. My anxiety over finishing the trench left me. I actually found that I had more energy for the task at hand because I figured by working in the trench I was freeing them up to enjoy the “Better portion.”

Guess what? As I looked around from time to time, I saw neighborhood kids, who couldn't have been more than 7 or 8 years old, trying to shovel dirt into a wheelbarrow. I saw youth helping small children push the wheelbarrow to the dumping site and then giving the kids a ride back in the wheelbarrow. I saw a number of the youth steadily working at digging the trench. Their shovels may not have been full each time but the trench was slowly getting deeper, inch by inch and after all we don't have to do everything, there would be another group next week and the week after that and the week after that.

Kingdom work, done in the light of the BEST PART is definitely BEST!
Amen.