

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 17, 2016

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Acts 8:4-13

Luke 10:38-42

The Master's Plan - A Master Plan: Learning More About Jesus

This is the second of three sermons on the three primary ways we go about *Sharing Christ and Changing Lives*, as we prepare to discuss a potential building project to better fulfill this purpose.

Last week we looked at the importance of the firm foundation of anything and everything we do here — Jesus Christ — especially as we consider the challenges facing Christian families these days. Next week, we'll look at living our faith beyond these walls. But today, we consider the structure of our life together — the content of our faith — the importance of learning more about Jesus.

Pablo Casals was a world-renowned cellist who lived into his late 90's (died 1973). He was known for his faithful practice regimen. When he was in his mid-80's he was asked why he continues to practice four and five hours a day. Casals answered: "Because I think I am making progress."

I feel the same about our faith — no one will ever know too much, let alone even enough, when it comes to learning about Jesus. And Mary and Martha, who we heard about from Luke, are a perfect example of the tension that I think we experience today.

But let's consider it in it's bigger context. The question that Jesus is answering here is found earlier in this chapter....A lawyer has posed a question to Jesus about eternal life. What does it take to acquire it? When Jesus challenges him to recall the law, the lawyer answers:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

The Good Samaritan becomes the illustration of how one loves one's neighbor. And Martha and Mary become the example of how one loves God.

This is what it means to follow Christ!

The Samaritan loves his neighbor, and Mary loves Jesus.

And to be a disciple means loving both.

We'll talk more about loving others next week, when we look at living our faith. But this week we're exploring loving God by learning about Jesus.

Of course, when Martha complained to Jesus that Mary was NOT being helpful by focusing her attention on Jesus' teaching, rather than helping serve the guests, Jesus could have said, "You're absolutely right Martha. What was I thinking? Why don't we all come into the kitchen and help with the dishes and talk while we work?" This would have satisfied both Mary and Martha. But Jesus is making a point here.

This dinner party is not about tending to the needs of the guests, not about making sure that everyone does what they're supposed to in order to make it go smoothly. The dinner party is about the guest of honor; and the guest is demanding full attention.

Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible called the Message, says it like this:

Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it — it's the main course and won't be taken from her.

Thinking of God's word as the "main course" in the feast of life, doesn't say that listening/learning is better than doing. Rather it places these activities in balance and perspective.

In the corporate world we're reminded to "keep the main thing the main thing."

Christians also are urged to remember that the main course is just that, the main course. The love of God and the love of neighbor must be front and center — no discussion, no excuses, no distractions, no worries.

Martha, dear Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.

We know this — we understand Martha's predicament!

Today's Martha could be working at her computer, checking her tablet or talking on her phone while driving or eating lunch. She could be on a treadmill while making appointments for the next day. She could be grading papers, on her phone, checking in with family about coming home late. She could be trying to have a business meeting in the middle of a crowded airplane while juggling a watery cup of Coke. She could have a baby on one hip and a textbook for night class on the other. She could be receiving chemotherapy on her lunch hour and trying like crazy to save her job. She could be overscheduled, overbooked and overwhelmed.

The pace could make her snap. The urgent demands of life collide with the urgent demands of the gospel—and anyone's trigger can be tripped. Martha, dear Martha. We know you well.

Distractions and worries abound. Jesus calls us to stop. Stop what we are doing and listen. There is need of only one thing. This good news is for you. It doesn't matter if you are male or female, gay or straight, old or young, red or blue. Whether you are working in the kitchen or sitting on the floor, this good news is for you. You. There is need of only one thing.

For those of us caught in a never-ending swirl of priority setting with too much to do and too little time, drowning in commitment fatigue, swamped with busyness overload, Jesus offers the way. The Gospel trumps busy. The Gospel trumps worry. The Gospel trumps distractions.

Always. Martha, dear Martha, there is relief.

Jesus is the host, not Martha or Mary or any one of us, and he spreads the word like a banquet to nourish and strengthen us. And the word has within it commands both to sit and listen, and to go and do.

Jesus is clear about the importance of the main course — it is not an appetizer or a side dish. The good news is that Jesus the host grants permission for all distracted, frantic people to sit down and eat their fill of word and promise.

It's not enough to come to worship.

Anne Lamott says, “I do not understand the mystery of grace — only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.” We must be on the move, growing, learning, questioning, wondering, discussing...

There may be some aspects of our lives that are fine to stop growing at age 15 or 18 (How old were you the last time you were in a class or discussion group about the faith? Confirmation? College?) But as life gets more complicated, and the challenges we face mature; we need a comparable faith, mature and complex.

We need more than a child’s belief in magic. We need to admit that we do not have everything figured out, and that there is plenty that goes on in the world and in our lives that simply cannot be explained. There is more to life than can be defined in scientific terms, or discovered through a Google search. And we need to engage the big questions and issues with Jesus.

In the story in Acts, Philip has gone to the region known as Samaria to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to any who would listen. Samaria, as you may recall, is the home of the Samaritans, an “impure race of people descended from Jews who had married outside of their faith.” In many ways they worshiped as the Jews; however, their worship had developed apart from Jewish worship because they were unwelcome in Jewish life.

It is in this setting that Simon the Magician is practicing his art. His magic is spellbinding, and he is considered to be the “power of God that is called Great.” We do not know what kind of magic he practiced or what tricks he did. We just know that he was someone who captivated the people’s attention.

The Bible tells us that Philip came proclaiming the good news and that people began to listen to him and turn away from Simon the Magician. Simon himself turned to see what message Philip brought, and it wasn’t long before he became a believer as well. Then Simon “stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.” Simon had moved from magic to miracles. He had gone from practicing illusions to practicing faith. That’s what happens when we learn more about Jesus. We go from believing in magic, to believing in miracles.

There are many times when I have wished for magical powers to make things happen. Whether in the hospital room or during fundraising season, in the office or in prayer, I have often wished I could just chant some magic words that would make everything happen the right way.

But there are no magic words, and so the longer I serve as a pastor the more I am learning to rely on God to work the miracles instead of relying on myself or others to work the magic.

Because magic doesn’t require much of us. It is entertaining and amusing. But magic is pretty much an end in itself. Miracles, however, point to something beyond themselves. Miracles are signs of the “inbreaking” kingdom of God. They point beyond themselves to God, who is in our midst. They are signs that God is here, and it is God’s presence that invites us to respond in faith.

A pastor tells of discussing miracles with one of his mentors (Dr. Erwin Bohmfalk).

They were discussing the feeding of the 5,000, and I was really stuck on the idea that it wasn’t a miracle unless the five loaves and two fish magically multiplied until there were twelve baskets full after everyone had eaten. My mentor challenged my thinking and said, “Perhaps they miraculously multiplied, as you say, but what would you think if people really had food with them? Then suppose that when it came time for dinner, Jesus asked who had food, and no one was willing to share. Now suppose that the little boy who gave

everything inspired the people to do likewise. Then after the potluck feast was finished, there was plenty left over."

I was astounded. That would be no miracle at all. But then he replied, "To me, it's pretty miraculous when selfish people are inspired to share. What do you think?" I had been looking for a magic, and he showed me a miracle.

Life in the church is a journey from magic to miracles. If you dare follow Jesus, then the miracle of faith will be yours.

When we join the likes of Mary and Simon, feasting on the main course that Jesus is serving, then and only then, will we really be ready to put hands and feet, hearts and minds to work.

Amen.