

Messiah, July 21, 2019

Luke 10:38-42

“The One Essential Thing”

By Sam Gray

Fifty-three years ago, David Dezern and I were in 6th grade together at Brunson Elementary. He was in Mr. Montague’s homeroom, I believe, and I was in Mrs. Shelton’s. And fifty-six years ago we were in 3rd grade together, also at Brunson. If I remember correctly, our teacher was Mrs. Middleton.

I grew up in Nicaragua, but those were the two times while I was in elementary school that my parents came home on furlough, so I was here for the first half of 3rd grade and the 2nd half of 6th grade. The rest of my primary school experience was in Nicaragua, where I went to public school in Spanish and was also taught in English by my mother at home.

As I was reading through our gospel story getting ready for today, the thought came to me that my mother, at various times, played the role of Mary and Martha... and Jesus! She would be in the kitchen baking bread and churning butter and cooking lunch (like Martha) while I would be working on an assignment and then she would come in and listen to what I had to say (like Mary) and then I would sit and listen to her teaching me (like Jesus in the story).

I imagine that if I would ask each one of you this morning, “Are you like Mary or Martha or Jesus in this story?” that your answer *might* be, “Yes, I am.” Maybe we don’t have to look at these two sisters - Martha, who was busy serving and Mary, who sat at Jesus’ feet and listened - and try to decide which one of them is right and which one is wrong.

I spent this past week in Barbados, attending the Synod of the Eastern West Indies Province of the Moravian Church. That Province is made up of 6 Conferences that cover 10 islands in the Caribbean: Barbados, Antigua, Trinidad, Tobago, St. Kitts, St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John, Grenada and Tortola. You can probably imagine that there were a lot of different perspectives present in the 104 delegates gathered at that Synod.

But when I arrived in Barbados last Monday afternoon, I took a taxi to the hotel where I would be staying. There was a North American man in the taxi who was also going to the hotel. As we were riding along, at one point he said, in a very loud voice, “They drive on the wrong side of the road here.” He must have seen my puzzled look, because he continued, “Well, we drive on the right side of the road, and this isn’t the right side of the road, so it must be the *wrong* side of the road.”

Oh boy... I didn’t know if I wanted to say anything. But the taxi driver did. He said, “You know, sometimes it *is* about right and wrong, but sometimes it’s not about right and wrong – it’s about right and left.”

So maybe it can be helpful to look at Mary and Martha in that way. Not as one being right and the other being wrong. I mean, imagine trying to sum up this story in that way with a meme on social media. It would have a picture of both women, and it might say something like:

This is Mary. Mary sits and listens to someone talking. Be like Mary.
and...

This is Martha. Martha welcomes friends into her home. She likes to practice hospitality and serve others and meet their needs. Don't be like Martha.

That would not be an easy message for me to have to preach as the Director of Mission Outreach of the Board of World Mission of the Moravian Church in North America. So maybe we need to look at this story more carefully. The story comes near the end of Luke chapter 10. Earlier in that same chapter, Jesus had sent out 70 disciples to go into people's homes and minister to them *and* to allow those people to show hospitality to them. And then right before this story (of Mary and Martha) Jesus told another story about a man who showed mercy to someone in need. He bandaged his wounds and then took him to an inn and took care of him. He showed hospitality to this stranger. Jesus affirmed the actions of this Good Samaritan and told his listeners to go and do likewise.

And as Jesus and his disciples went on their way, they entered this village where this woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. Martha did what was expected of her – she showed good old southern hospitality (Of course, I'm referring to Southern Israel or Judea). But hospitality was really important in those days and in that part of the world. (Most of the Apostle Paul's letters to the churches of that time make some reference to showing hospitality as being evidence of one's faith.)

So there was nothing wrong with what Martha was doing. But Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to what he was saying. Now, to us, sitting at someone's feet might sound subservient. But for Mary, a woman, to be sitting at the feet of Jesus, a man, and learning from him, was, at that time, subversive. In Hebrew culture, sitting at one's feet is a way of describing a student and mentor relationship, or a disciple. The accepted practice was for women to learn from women and men to learn from men.

But Jesus always seemed to be breaking the rules.
Like when he healed someone on the Sabbath day of rest.
Or when he asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water.
Or when he touched people with leprosy in order to heal them.
Or when he ate with sinners.
The list goes on.

And here, Jesus shows that it is not only *OK* for Mary to be his disciple, no, he says that she has chosen the *better part*. Now think about those words: the better part. With our tendency to take sides, and to think not in terms of right and left but rather right and wrong we may focus on that word, "better." Ah-hah! If Mary is doing the "better" thing, then it must be the *right* thing and what Martha is doing must be the wrong thing.

But maybe we need to look at that other word: "part." The better... part. To me, "part" seems to imply that this is not the whole. There's more to it. This is *part* of the picture, but it's not the

whole picture. Jesus didn't have to make the point that what Martha was doing (showing hospitality) was OK. Showing hospitality was always the *right* thing to do. But there was another part – the better part – that couldn't be *left* out (you see what I did there).

Mary wasn't trying to get out of doing the work (though, clearly, it seemed that way to Martha).

I enjoy, from time to time, being part of a Classic Rock group that we call the Moravian Buns. We've played in a few churches and at Laurel Ridge and Camp Hope in New Jersey. It's a lot of fun. But, since we use a lot of equipment (amplifiers, sound boards, microphones, drum sets and so on) there's also a lot of work involved in setting up and taking down. And it never fails that after our concerts there is someone in the crowd who wants to talk with me about mission opportunities. I've gotten quite a reputation with the other members of the band. I can imagine Brad Bennett going up to Jesus and saying, "Lord, I know that your mission is important, but do you not care that my brother has left me to do all the work by myself?" (I think they think that I prearrange to have these mission-minded people present, so that I can sit and talk instead of doing my share of the work.)

But that's not what Mary was doing. She was learning while her sister, Martha, was serving. And if I may put on my "mission hat" for a moment, I must say that these two sisters – Mary with her learning and Martha with her serving – give us a pretty good picture of what mission is all about and how mission takes place. At the Board of World Mission, we try not to use the phrase, "mission trip." We prefer to say, "service learning." (Martha Mary!)

Because mission is not just about doing – it's also about being. Doing and being. Serving and learning.

What are some of the things that we, as Moravians, are *doing* in mission? How are we serving?

Well, in Sierra Leone, the Moravian Secondary School in the village of Ngiehun has more than 200 students. Before that school was established, children in that village who completed 6th grade had to travel about 50 kilometers away to continue their schooling. They would have to live with people in the town of Bo and go to school there. This created many problems, especially for the girls, who were often mistreated and made to serve almost as slaves for the family and even in some cases sexually abused. A high percentage of these young girls would end up pregnant before completing what we would call Middle School or Junior High. So Mohamed and Safie Braima started a school with one grade (7th grade for us)

By the end of that first year, there had already been a drastic drop in the pregnancy rate for young girls. So they added a second year (8th grade) and another group of first year students joined them. Now there are 3 grades (forms) and a Senior Secondary School has also been added. The Moravian Church is serving the community in that way.

The Moravian Church in Cuba is now present in 6 different regions of the island. The John Amos Comenius Children's Center in Havana serves families in a marginalized area with weekly activities and programs for the children and their parents. There are 4 Moravian Day

Care Centers in Cuba, 3 of them in Guantánamo. The ones in Guantánamo are called “Los Moravitos” (The Little Moravians). These centers provide a service to the community and also provide employment for staff members.

In Lima, Peru, it’s the “Burbujitas Moravas” or Little Moravian Bubbles. It’s a Laundromat started by one of the local Moravian congregations, with a grant from the Board of World Mission, and it helps to support the work of the church there in Peru. Last year, the pastor of that congregation, brother Manuel, became aware of an area in the Peruvian Amazon where there aren’t any established churches. He made an exploratory visit and then invited brother Justin Rabbach (Executive Director of the Board of World Mission) and the Rev. Christopher Valencia (president of the Peru Moravian Mission Area) and myself to accompany him on another visit. We met with 25 Aguaruna tribal leaders. The Moravians in Lima and Chiclayo had collected food and clothing and Christian Education materials that they distributed. The Amazon District of the Moravian Church in Peru was formally organized and received into the church and 2 weeks from today I will be traveling to Peru to attend their second Synod and there will be delegates from the Amazon District.

A group of Moravians from Home Church and Friedberg Moravian just got back from a visit to the Ray of Hope orphanage, which serves the Shimba Hills community in Kenya.

The Ahuas Clinic continues to provide medical care to people in the Moskitia region of Honduras.

Moravians in Albania (with support from Home Moravian Church here in Winston-Salem) are serving more than 40 families in the Bathore community of the capital city, Tirana. They provide food and financial support, but they also provide classes for men and women and activities for the children.

Lots of doing going on. Lots of serving. Lots of Martha!

And that’s good, I believe.

But listen again to what Jesus said to Martha in our story. Martha came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

And Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” Did you catch that word, “distracted?” And that’s how Luke tells this story. He didn’t say “Martha was *involved* in her many tasks” or “Martha was passionate about serving Jesus.” No, he said, “But Martha was distracted by her many tasks.” She was busy with so many things (as so often we can be in mission and in ministry) that she missed the better thing – the important thing – or, as we Moravians might say, “the essential thing.”

You see, what we *do* in mission and in ministry is the outward expression of who we *are*. It’s not just about *what* we do, but also *why* we do it.

In about an hour from now, I will be heading up to Laurel Ridge for a week of Mission Camp. 50 campers and counselors from Home Moravian and Hope Moravian and New Hope Moravian in Miami as well as Rolling Hills and King of Kings, will spend a week going out and serving the community during the day, and then sitting and learning and reflecting in the evening.

And I guess this story of Mary and Martha says to me that we can't have one without the other. For camp purposes, we've summed it up in a simple and somewhat catchy way by saying

Have it

Love it

Live it

Give it

Got that? Now watch:

Have it (hands clenched)

Love it (hands over heart)

Live it (hand out to side)

Give it (hands outstretched in front)

We understand that in the midst of all of these good things, the one essential thing is our relationship with our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer and the way we live out that relationship in faith and love and hope.

So we *have* this relationship. We sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him.

We *love* Jesus. And this love inspires us to do the things we do and serve the way we serve, not as a distraction from that relationship but rather as a demonstration of that relationship in our lives. So we *live* it.

But then we realize that we can't keep this all for ourselves. It's not only for us, for us, but for all the world. So we *give* it.

Since you all don't get to go to camp with me, just do this with me now:

Have it!

Love it!

Live it!

Give it!

Now let's all go out and be Mary and Martha and Jesus in the world.

Amen.

