

“The Jesus Course”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 15
New Testament Lesson – Luke 10:38-42

In his book “The Physical Side of Being Spiritual,” Peter Gillquist describes two common theological errors when it comes to understanding how God works in our lives.

The first is what he calls “Tube Theology.” This is the notion that humans are merely conduits through which God wants to do his work. The goal of this theology is to let go of our own initiative and will, so that the Holy Spirit can take us over completely. We no longer live and work for God, but he lives and works through us. This is the passive error or mistake.

The other mistake is its opposite: “Bootstrap Theology.” It says, “God has given you everything you need to do what he wants you to do, so just get out there and do it.” This is the active error.

The biblically correct position is what Gillquist calls “Synergy.” It’s the viewpoint given to us by the apostle Paul when he describes himself and his colleagues – and us – as “God’s fellow workers” (1 Corinthians 3:9, NIV).

God has not called us to be merely conduits or tubes, but sons and daughters. Nor did he mean for us to be self-made individualists. God has called us to be co-workers.¹

In our New Testament Lesson today, Martha and Mary represent two opposite ways of serving and working alongside the Lord. Martha reflects more of the bootstrap approach, pitching in and doing as much as she can using her God-given skills and talents. Mary sees herself more as a conduit through which God might work, an open vessel or tube, ready to receive what the Lord might pour into her.

The trick in understanding Martha and Mary’s 1st Century-encounter with Jesus and what it has to do with us today, some 2,000 years later, is to realize that neither position in and of itself is correct.

While it’s true that in this instance Jesus favors Mary over Martha, Mary’s sitting at the feet of Jesus is actually only half our job as followers of Christ. We know this from looking at the story in Luke that comes right before Martha and Mary, the story of the Good Samaritan.

¹ Ben Patterson, *Serving God: The Grand Essentials of Work and Worship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 158-59.

In that story, Jesus shows what it is to love your neighbor as yourself. Remember, the Good Samaritan takes care of a stranger as if he were taking care of his own. And Jesus' final words to us there are, "Go and do likewise," do as the Good Samaritan has done, minister to the needs of others, in Christ-like fashion.

And here we have Martha right on the heels of that story trying to do just that, minister to the needs of her household and her honored guest. If she failed to prepare a lavish meal on such an occasion, it would be unheard of – Martha would bring shame upon herself and her entire household.

So where does Martha get it wrong? Martha gets it wrong, not in her actions, but in her priorities. In too much "doing", without first spending sometime "being", in Christ-like manner. Martha is so consumed by her social obligation to prepare the perfect meal that she can't see the opportunity God is presenting for her – to sit at the feet of Jesus, at least for a little while. Doesn't that sound like the better course of action, to check in with Jesus first, and then to "go and do," as Jesus directs us.

But that's not what Martha has chosen. By jumping into her meal preparation with her priorities still out of whack, Martha is lost, spinning out of control, unable to focus on anything but herself. I mean she starts out OK, doesn't she? Luke tells us (quote), "Martha welcomed (Jesus) into her home." That's not a bad start, welcoming Jesus into our homes. We can't criticize Martha for doing that, certainly not when we struggle so much to do the same, welcoming Jesus. It's not easy finding the time to invite Jesus into our homes, maintaining the focus to have Jesus be a part of our day-to-day lives, moment by moment.

It's not easy coming together for daily devotionals as a family; setting up a place in our homes for quiet reflection and prayer, and then spending time there each day; it's not easy to integrate the teachings of Jesus into our relationships with family, friends, and even the salesclerk, fellow motorist or some other "stranger" we might encounter – these practices are not easy.

Like Martha, our lives get consumed by everything but Jesus, unless, like Mary, we start out by sitting at the feet of the Lord first, ***partaking of what Jesus has to offer first.***

When we allow all that's going on in our lives to distract us from Jesus, we begin to spin out of control, unable to focus on anything but ourselves, and thus, we become just like Martha.

In Luke, we read that "Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to (Jesus) 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.'"

Wow! Martha's so wrapped up in herself – so distracted by her many tasks – that she's completely out of control here. First she questions Jesus whether he even cares, and then before he can answer, she tells him to tell Mary to help her, saying, "Tell her then to help me."

You would have to fix one amazing meal to come back from a self-centered outburst like that. And in fact, that's just what Jesus tells Martha in response. "Martha, Martha," he says, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part..." Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, Mary has chosen (quote) "the main course." You can see how "the better part," as it says in our Bible, can also be seen as "the main course." I imagine Peterson chose the words "main course" because of how well they go with the meal Martha is preparing.

Jesus who in Mary has chosen to come alongside, first, is the main course, and everything that comes before, during and after is merely an appetizer, side dish or dessert – icing on the cake. As good as they might be, these side dishes offer no sustenance, if they are not served with Jesus as the main course.

This is why Mary is favored – not just for sitting at the feet of Jesus, but for going to Jesus first as the main course, unlike Martha who barely has time for Jesus, because she's too busy with her social obligation, too busy fitting into the mold society has set for her.

Jesus isn't going to push his way into our lives to get a place at "the perfect meal" as we understand it, unless we first listen to Jesus about what ought to be on our plates and in what order.

First we pay attention to the main course – to Jesus – and then we can select and organize everything else that's to come, so that all of life becomes a complement to who we are as followers of Christ.

The good news in all of this is it's OK in life to have an appetizer, side dishes and even dessert – ***the appetizer of some playtime***, a side dish or ***side trip*** if you're on vacation, and something ***sweet or exciting*** just for the fun of it. All of this is OK in life, as long as it fits in with the main course, as long as it fits in with our devotion to Jesus and our active listening to his teachings.

Alan Cohen, author of "The Dragon Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Loving Freely, Living Fully," would fit in well at this church. I say this because Cohen seems to know us so well. For example, he tells about one evening when they "had a potluck dinner, and everyone brought a main dish." Not enough desserts to satisfy everyone's sweet tooth.

Their response: "Perfect!" "Here is our chance to cut calories and lose some weight." Well, you know what happened at the next potluck several weeks later. Everyone brought only dessert, to which they said, again, "Perfect!" "This is our opportunity to celebrate."

What were they celebrating? Cohen says he doesn't remember, they "just celebrated."²

² Alan Cohen, *The Dragon Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Loving Freely, Living Fully* (South Kortright, N.Y.: Eden Publishing Company, 1981), 38.

But just celebrating, for the sake of celebrating, doesn't quite get it. As Christians, we need to hold on to our awareness that the reason we have anything at all to celebrate in life is because of Jesus.

Everything we do and everything we say should be, at its core, a celebration of Jesus. If we are to enjoy God's favor, God's blessing, than all that we are in life must be organized around our love of Jesus. All that we do must be scheduled and prioritized to fit in with his teachings.

And when that's not the case – when we, like Martha, are so busy “doing life” that we forget what it is to “be” truly Christian, to be the church – then we also have lost sight of the better, we too have spent all our time worried about the appetizer, consumed by the side dishes, and distracted by all the tantalizing desserts. When we act too much like Luke's example of Martha, then we also lose sight of the main course in life, which is ***the Jesus course***.

Take a moment as we conclude our sermon time today, to think about what your life is organized around – your home, your spouse, your schoolwork or job duties, your money or lack there of, your friends and their interests. What's on the menu in your daily life? And then let's look and see how well all of that fits in with the main course, how well it fits with our love and knowledge Jesus Christ.

Perhaps it's a good fit – perhaps your life represents a well-balanced menu of daily activities and approaches to life that truly honor God and uplift the teachings of Jesus in all you do.

Or perhaps, like most of us – me included – the menu you've brought to the table today could use some healthier substitutions, some better selections from the main-course menu. It's our choice. Just like Mary chose the better part – what Peterson calls “the main course” – we too must decide which part, which course we focus on in life. Are we organizing our lives around nothing but side dishes and desserts, or are we really looking first to be guided by and inspired by the main course, which is Jesus. It's worth considering; for all of us.

Pastoral Prayer

As we come to you in prayer, O God, help us to focus our hearts and our minds on you. Time marches on and we have to wonder: do we?

Or are we content to look on our past accomplishments and surrender to complacency?

Do past resentments drain us of our energy and deprive us of the joys of the present?

In these moments of prayer, listening God, instill in us a deep appreciation of time.

Let us be reminded of this most precious gift each time we set our clocks and replace batteries in our watches ... and help us to use it wisely.

Let us use our time to share our riches with others: the money we earn and the wealth of our church family and faithful friends.

Help us to breathe in all that is ours: the peace that surrounds us and precious words of love given to us when we least expect them.

We offer our prayers of thanksgiving for all we have been given, offered in the name of the one whose time on earth was lived so that we might know what a life of love looks like.

We pray in the name of the one who came that we might have life eternal, Jesus the Christ, the one who gave us the Lord's Prayer that we might pray it together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.