



Sister Act: Mary and Martha

TEXT
Luke 10:38-42

July 10, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The most common question I have heard this week is this: “What do we do?”

Someone said, “I feel powerless and confused. What do we do?”

“I am angry ... this has to stop,” someone else said to me.

Brent Thompson was murdered in Dallas — a seven-year veteran of the transit force who had been married less than two weeks.

Patrick Zamarripa was a 32-year-old father of two.

Michael Krol, age 40, wanted his whole life to be a police officer.

Loren Ahrens, someone said, didn’t let the evil in this world get in the way of his doing good.

Michael Smith, married for 17 years, has two girls, 14 and 9.

They were all murdered while doing their job: protecting and keeping peace at a peaceful march.

And then there was Micah Johnson, a veteran, taught by his country to be a skilled marksman. But he also says his country made him angry, so he shot these officers. It didn’t help anything.

Alton Sterling, straddled by two police officers, was shot

dead in Baton Rouge. The Justice Department is investigating.

Philando Castile was in a car with a broken taillight, so he got pulled over. When he allegedly reached for his wallet to retrieve the identification he was required to produce, he was shot. I don’t think anyone called 911 for medical help. He died.

So naturally, particularly in African American communities, their names join other names: Tamir Rice, 12 years old; Trayvon Martin (George Zimmerman sold the gun that killed Martin for over \$138,000); Michael Brown, who laid in the street for six hours; Laquan McDonald, shot 16 times while walking away, most of those while he was on the ground; Freddie Grey; Walter Scott, shot in the back; Eric Garner, choked to death. I could go on.

Protests have emerged in cities across the country, with some freeways shut down. Some injuries and arrests have occurred, but thank God, most of it is peaceful.

There was a police officer shot in the St. Louis area after he pulled someone over for a traffic violation. He returned to his car and was shot in the back. There have perhaps been more,

but I haven’t watched the news in several hours.

Politicians have talked about this and sometimes bent over backward to avoid actually talking about this.

Radio talk show folks have been quick to draw the lines on who to defend and who to blame. I wish God would confiscate the radio waves during seasons like this so that we wouldn’t listen to the sophomoric wisdom, wrapped in extreme arrogance, which passes for analysis. It is damaging this country.

We must pay attention to how quickly we use language that makes our neighbors somehow less human. They are thugs or unruly or terrorists. When we make them less human, their suffering becomes justified, collateral damage of the status quo. We are better than that.

And then others have just wept and asked, “What do we do?”

I’ll tell you one thing we need to do. We need to listen to Jesus one more time. We need to ask, “How do we be Christian in America at this particular moment? How do we live like Jesus?”

So months ago, we decided we would sit with Mary and Martha today. Martha is busy

with her tasks. When no one else knows what to do, Martha knows what to do.

I have affection for Martha because my wife, Carol, is a doer. She is going all the time. She gets up before the sun and goes all day long until we find our rest, most nights close to midnight. She sleeps fast and gets up to start again. Frequently, one of our last conversations of the day is what she is likely to accomplish before I awake in the morning. And if she has a day when she doesn't get much done, she has a bad day. She's a doer.

You may be like that. You may love people who are like that. If you are like that, you may find this word of Jesus to be troubling. Jesus seems to condemn Martha for doing her tasks.

Martha is busy with many tasks, but Mary just sits and listens to Jesus. Martha says, "Do you not care that she is not lifting a finger to help me? Look at her, just lazing around, doing nothing to help. Tell her to help me."

It seems reasonable.

Now if this were my house and my sister said, "Do you not care that I am working my fingers to the bone, and Tom is just sitting around watching the Royals?" my mother would say, "Tom, get up and help your sister. Be family. You are not a freeloader in this house. Get up and help."

But that is not what Jesus says.

"Martha," he says, "Mary has chosen the better part, which

will not be taken away from her."

It says Martha is distracted by her many tasks. What is stunning is that the Greek word that is translated "task" is *diakonia*. *Diakonia* doesn't mean tasks; *diakonia* means service. It can mean service in preparation for a meal, but almost every time it is used it is the service of ministry. *Diakonia* is the word from which we get "deacon." Martha is doing what the church is supposed to do.

Making this even more confusing, this moment immediately follows Jesus' conversation with the lawyer who wants to know, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. Do you remember it? It ends with Jesus telling the lawyer go and *do* likewise.

It seems to me Martha is doing what Jesus taught. We might expect Jesus to put his arm around the lawyer and say, "Do you see that woman Martha over there, the one busy with her tasks? Be like her. Martha is doing the service of ministry ... *diakonia*."

But now Jesus seems to change his mind. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her. So which is it: go and do, or sit and listen?

The first thing to say about this passage is that this is not about personality. Some people are on the go all the time; it's the way they are wired. They are always making a list, checking things off. When there is a party at their house, the table setting is perfect, the meal is planned,

with table settings of flowers from the backyard, napkins that match the artwork on the walls. Everything is thought out because that shows care. That's just who they are.

This story does not condemn that. It's not a story about personality.

Martha actually sounds like the kind of person that every church loves. I bet she was the one who hosted the cookout after the youth lock-in. She was the one who planned the Presbyterian Women's retreat. She was the one who gathered the tutors for the elementary school downtown. She was the one who organized Stephen Ministry training. She was the one who carried chancel flowers to the hospitals. She was the one who taught second-graders during every vacation Bible school. She gave her life to *diakonia*. Every church is better because of the Marthas in their midst.

This story does not condemn that.

If I understand the text, this is a story about what to do when doing leaves us frustrated.

The problem is not what she is doing. The problem is that she's mad about it. What she is doing doesn't bring the result she desires. She feels alone. You hear it in her complaint. "Jesus, don't you care that I am in here slaving away? I am serving, but I am alone. I am weary, I don't know how long I can do this. I need someone to help me."

I get that. Sometimes doing the right thing can make us uneasy because others aren't doing the right thing. We know what it

is to be weary and depressed, to lose some hope along the way, to lose some confidence along the way.

“I need someone to help me,” she says.

Jesus says, “Martha you are worried and distracted by many things. Mary has chosen the better part. It will not be taken from her.” The better part? It says she is listening to what Jesus is saying, but the Greek is more specific. It says she is listening to the *word* of Jesus.

I remember a conversation I had years ago. He said, “Tom, I love coming to church. I love what we talk about in church. But I have to be honest, sometimes the things we talk about in church seem so far from the rest of my week; it’s like I live in two different worlds.”

That makes a lot of sense to me. These are two different worlds, and this one is the real one. The world is violent. It is the tool we choose.

It is hard for us as a nation to have an honest conversation about the choice of violence, about how fear and suspicion constitute the nitrogen and oxygen in the air we breathe.¹

There are too many leaders who spend their voices describing the weakness of others, the flaws in the other side, the less than humanness of those not deemed on our side. They must stop. They are destroying that which they think they are saving.

So what we need to do is listen to the word of Jesus.

I am remembering Rev. Fuad Bahnan. In the 1980s, Bahnan was pastor of a small church

in Beirut, Lebanon. In 1983, the armies of Israel marched into Lebanon. Anticipating that the armies would lay siege to Beirut, Bahnan’s congregation purchased and stockpiled large amounts of food. The siege came. West Beirut was totally cut off. No food was allowed in. The Session of the church met to make arrangements for distributing the food they had stockpiled. Much to everyone’s surprise, they decided they would share their food with Muslims first. If there was food left over, they would share it with other Christians in Beirut. And if there was any left over, they should share it with their own congregation. It stunned the city.

When asked how they made that decision, he said that an older, quiet and much-respected elder — a woman — stood up, and cried out: “If we do not demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?”

There was enough for everyone.²

There was violence this week, and there will be again. It has always been part of our culture ... always. So we need to listen to the Word.

He said, *love your neighbor* — not because of the winsomeness of your neighbor, but because love lives in you.

He said, *love your enemies* — because love is the only power to free you from hating your enemies.

He said, *forgive seventy times seven* — because when yesterday’s injury becomes justification for today’s retaliation,

we only create tomorrow’s enemy.

He said, *love* — because love is the power that carries you through the storm.

Make it simple. Practice relationship. Treat a neighbor as a neighbor. Treat a stranger as a friend. Listen to others. Be joyful, even though you have considered the facts. Practice kindness, because everyone has an injured heart.

We need to sit and listen over and over and over. That word will never be taken away from us. It will not be taken away. That’s not how it works. We need to listen again and again because too often we give his word away in exchange for other words.

There was violence this week. But there were also strangers bringing flowers just to show that we are in this together. There have been preachers who have prayed. There have been candles lit and vigils held. Better angels have showed up.

I know of a woman named Rickie. She’s a black woman who works at a Chipotle. Her life has had her share of heartbreak, and she, like so many black people in this country, has had some frightening run-ins with authorities.

She, like all of us, watched the events unfold in Dallas. She went to work the next morning. She says a lot of officers eat at her Chipotle. The first one came in and started to place his order, but Rickie stopped, walked from behind the counter and hugged him. He broke down and sobbed in Chipotle.

The word of our culture is that some of us are human beings. The word of Jesus is that we are all human beings. We all love and hurt and dream and struggle with what has gone wrong in the past and fear what tomorrow might bring.

So let us listen to the word of our teacher and our Savior. Let us listen every day to his word of love, of relationship, of care. That word won't be taken away. It will never be taken away. The danger is that God's people will choose to give it away for a different word. And that is the one thing we simply cannot do.

¹I can't find it now, but this turn of phrase is adapted from David Von Drehle in his book *Rise to Greatness*.

²Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life* (Geneva: 2001), p. 126

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.