

THE BETTER (BUT NOT THE ONLY) PART

Sermon, July 17, 2022

Texts: Luke 10: 38-42; Colossians 3:1-17

When we looked at this Gospel passage nine years ago, I told you how, much to my younger daughter's amusement (*we had just arrived home from my picking her up from school*), I found in our mailbox addressed to me an unsolicited catalogue from "Victoria's Secret." I turned and smiled at Hannah and sang the opening line from an (*obnoxious*) 2011 song, "I'm sexy and I know it ...". I don't know how they got my name and address, but there it was. I've learned at the time that Victoria's Secret was THE largest retailer of female lingerie; sales in 2012 totaled \$6.12 billion. The company was founded by Tufts graduate Roy Raymond in June 1977. He got the inspiration for it after the awkward and uncomfortable experience of trying to buy some lingerie for his wife at a local department store ... he borrowed \$40,000 from his parents and \$40,000 from the bank to establish a store where men could feel comfortable buying lingerie, which is probably why I, a male, got the unsolicited catalogue of female lingerie in the mail (*which promptly went into the recycling bin*). By the way, you may remember there's nothing British about Victoria's Secret other than the name; the faux-European look is a marketing strategy totally made in the USA. The London address on the catalogue cover was fake; the actual headquarters for Victoria's Secret was in Columbus, Ohio. After five years Roy Raymond sold the company for \$1 million to The Limited, tragically, not long after that, he committed suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge.

But the sermon on this short passage from Luke's Gospel is not about *that* Victoria's Secret. This sermon is about what I like to call the *victorious* secret, the "secret" to living life well. Last week we read in this same chapter from Luke of the expert in the law who wanted to learn this "secret;" as mentioned last week, his question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" could be understood as "Jesus, what do I have to do to get or acquire a good and full life? What is it that I have to do to get my life right?" (and I'm not going to re-explain all that; sermon copies are in the narthex and a digital copy is online at www.gccp.org). When Jesus countered, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it? How do you understand it?" He responded, "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 love your neighbor as yourself."

"Right!" Jesus had replied. "Do this, and you will live!"

As pointed out last week, Jesus was not giving a sardonic reply to some testy, pesky lawyer; I believe He was giving an enthusiastic reply of affirmation to a man who gave a really good answer. "You got it! Do this and you will live! You'll come alive! You'll find life to be better, fuller, more abundant and delightful as you keep on loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself."

I want to quickly take time to note something I didn't highlight last week: the commandment to love God comes *before* the commandment to love our neighbors. This is an important part of the "secret." Trust me on this ... if we don't honor the first, we won't do a very good job on the second. In other words, if we do not "Take Time to be Holy" (*our previous hymn*), if we don't learn how to love and honor and serve God first and foremost, and live accordingly, we will not love our neighbors well ... nor will we love our families well, or our co-workers well, or even love ourselves well, for that matter. The key to living well is to honor both commandments, in order. And that takes time and effort and attention and discipline and dedication. Take time to be holy. The secret to living well, the secret to victorious living, is to honor both of the two great commandments.

In this morning's short Gospel reading we read Jesus " ... came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him." As Jesus began to talk, Mary, one of the sisters who lived in the home, proceeded to sit at His feet and absorb every word He spoke. But the other sister, Martha, was busily at work trying to be a proper hostess while her sister Mary and all the disciples, sat there listening to Jesus. I can imagine Martha in the kitchen banging the pots a little more loudly than necessary as she fumed over her sister Mary. Finally, she just couldn't take it any more, and she comes in and I'm sure with some exasperation blurts out, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all of the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

When we've looked at this passage in years past, I pointed out that the typical commentary on this passage is critical of Martha, as if to say, "Martha just doesn't get it. Mary knows what's important." But I've always thought there's something about *Martha* that deserves our notice and even our admiration. I think if Martha had a last name, it may have been Stewart. She is a hostess! And she wants to be properly hospitable for her honored guests. And this is admittedly my personal conjecture, but I also think it's quite possible Martha is beginning to grasp the enormity of just Who Jesus is. Maybe it is dawning on her that Jesus really is somehow God incarnate, that the God of the universe has actually walked into *her* home, that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is *her* guest, and she realizes she has the immense privilege

of serving Him. What an honor, to receive and serve and even feed ... God! So the hostess in her understandably wants to do the very best. That's a commendable attitude! That's good! *(As an aside, that is an attitude that should govern all our hosting and interaction with each other ... we should host and greet and converse with people here as if we are hosting, greeting, conversing with Jesus, for in a way, we are! He lives within us.)*

And I also think Martha has been listening all along to Jesus' clear teaching about service. Remember, this passage follows Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus apparently criticized the do-nothing priest and Levite, both religious professionals, who walked by a man in obvious need and DID nothing. In that parable Jesus *affirms* hands-on active service in being a neighbor to those in need of mercy, He affirms the Samaritan who rolled up his sleeves and went to work, taking time and effort and energy and expense to help and serve. And earlier in this same chapter, Luke 10:2, Jesus said, *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."* He doesn't say the *listeners* are few; He says the *laborers*, those who really go to work, *they* are few. In other places Jesus said things like, *"Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things I tell you?"* It is clear that Jesus wants and desires and is pleased by service; hands-on, practical, doing-something service! The last thing He is going to tell any Martha is to stop serving. But He does want her to remember what not to lose sight of, to remember what is of primary importance.

Some of us may relate easily to Mary who loved to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen while He talked. Others of us relate better to Martha who preferred to work for Jesus while all the talking was going on. But both are necessary! In a sense, there is a Mary and a Martha living within each of us. One may be more dominant than the other, but that only means that we have to nurture the other part of us. For both Mary and Martha are necessary to a healthy soul. We must love God and take time to give attention to Him, *and* we must get busy serving Him and loving our neighbor. No, Jesus isn't condemning Martha. Rather, it is out of concern for those Marthas who have obeyed the call to work and serve that He reminds them of the importance of taking time to be holy, taking time honor the first commandment, taking time to sit at Jesus feet, taking time to nurture the relationship that gives you the reason and direction for the service and activity in the first place.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her." The better part ... that's what the responsible Marthas can lose sight of in their faithful service.. Life has so many parts, doesn't it? There is the part about our responsibility at home to people who are counting on us, who depend on us. There is the part about our responsibility at work, at church, at civic associations. There is the part about our responsibility to friends, to our parents, our responsibilities to our children and grandchildren, and there is the part about being a conscientious neighbor by being an informed citizen and a discerning and responsible voter. There is the part about our responsibility to care for ourselves through exercise and diet and proper rest. At times it seems like we keep accumulating more and more parts to life, more and more responsibilities, and the pieces of our "life pie" keep getting sliced smaller and smaller, which permits less and less time with all of them, and you know what often happens ,, before long we don't feel like we are doing a good job at any of these particular parts, although all the parts are right and good and worthy of our time and energy, and that is when we start to frazzle, and tend to get prickly with others ... starting at home, like Martha with her sister Mary. And that is when Jesus ever-so-tenderly says, *"Keep your focus on the better part."*

To attend to the better part is to make sure we take time to nurture our souls by join Mary at Jesus' feet. It is to make certain our spirits are fed and nourished. This is to honor the first great commandment. As we come again and again to the feet of Jesus, week by week, day by day, all the parts of our lives start to become more united, more integrated, more "balanced" around the "hub" of the one Savior. And as a result, we have more motivation, more energy and direction for everything else we do to carry out the second commandment, to love our neighbor.

The secret to living well and loving well, is to conscientiously honor both commandments.

(This final part was edited out on the spot due to time; I include it here) In the little time we have remaining I want to quickly point out that Paul echoes this same theme in Colossians, "Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." Paul goes on to say that to effectively do that, we must do what we can to get rid of the wrong things. In fact, in verse 5 he says that we are to put to death ... literally, the Greek can be translated "execute" ... certain things in our lives. "Put to death sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." Paul says we aren't simply to practice "depravity management" and try to control evil acts and attitudes. He says, "Eradicate them. Wipe them out. Stop making excuses for them. Exterminate them, before they exterminate you." There is a sermon in itself here, but Paul basically exhorts us to do all we can to eradicate the attitudes and passions fostered and promoted and fanned into flame by that other Victoria's Secret! Sexuality is a wonderful gift from God; in its proper context, it is a powerful angel that can accomplish wonderful things. However, when powerful angels fall, they become the most destructive demons. This basic, core drive is quite often one of the first things to go off kilter when we don't honor the first commandment, especially in our sex-saturated culture. But again, that's another sermon.