

"The Martha Syndrome"
Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year C
July 18, 2010
Text: Luke 10:38-42
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All of us know that idolatry is wrong. We realize from our years of Bible study that it is a sin to worship something other than God. *God alone* is to be worshiped, and to put anything in the place of *God* is sinful. We know this to be true.

History, as well as our Bible, would teach us that the most threatening idol is often the one nearest home. In other words, the trickiest idolatry may be when we take a good thing and try to make it the best thing. What that means is that the conscientious Christian may have little difficulty distinguishing between good and evil, but may be almost helpless to distinguish between the good and the best.

Let me tell you a story. He went to seminary in love, unlike most of his classmates who went to seminary either already married or hoping to fall in love. The young woman he loved was still in college several states away, and because he had taken the vow of poverty, like most seminarians, there would be no quick flights back and thus no reunion with her until Thanksgiving. "Who said Methodists don't have monasteries?" he remarked with sadness.

The second day of his seminary existence, he received his first letter from her. What joy, what ecstasy, what rapture! He took it from his little mailbox as if it were a cashier's check for a million dollars. He carried it to a quiet and private place and devoured it like a starving person might attack a steak dinner. And then he read it again. That afternoon in class he read it three more times. After all, first things first. Later in the evening in the library, he exegeted it, as seminary students are taught to deal with biblical texts. That night he read it in bed and kissed it goodnight.

You see, in that letter, his lover revealed herself to him. She told him what she had been doing. She told him what she had been thinking. She told him what she had been feeling. She told him how much she missed him, loved him, and in her life was preparing a place for him that where she was he would be also. It was a wonderful letter, but of course, she was a wonderful girl.

He kept the letter, as you might imagine. In the most secure of all places, he kept all her letters. What a treasure: her letters, her heart, her mind, herself. He read them many times over. He knew whole passages of them from memory. He kept them more or less indexed by date, and then one Saturday he spent all day cross-indexing them by subject and mood. Ah, sweet mystery of life.

Imagine, then, everyone's surprise, especially hers, when Thanksgiving came, and he chose to spend the entire holiday in the dorm, pasting her letters into a gold-embossed scrapbook. You see, everyone knows that you don't confuse the letter with the lover. A letter may be a good thing, but it is not the best thing. The best thing is the lover.

The substitution of a good thing for the best thing may be called the Martha Syndrome, because Martha is the patron saint of all those who would elevate a good thing to the level of the best thing. You heard her story read a few moments ago. High-minded, well-intentioned Martha, who wanted nothing more but the best for her Lord, had to learn what may be the hardest lesson for good people to learn, namely, that the good cannot substitute for the best. Even the best of good things cannot take the place of the best. "You shall have *no other gods before me*" is the commandment.

Those of you who know me well are aware of how much like Martha I can be at times. Martha was striving to be the perfect hostess. Her concern was to provide Jesus and his disciples with the hospitality they deserved, and that meant there were dozens of details to be attended to. I know what it's like to entertain with that kind of devotion: the house has to be perfectly neat and clean with every decorative item in its proper place; the landscaping has to be groomed

and trimmed; a fresh flower arrangement should be picked out for the dining room table; recently purchased artwork has to be framed and hung; the carpet needs to be cleaned; the Yankee Candles need to reflect the season; the most appropriate CDs need to be chosen and put in the stereo; and of course, the meal has to be just right. The old placemats will never do, and we simply must have napkins to match the new ones. If only we had time to redecorate this room. Blue. I think I'd paint it blue. It ain't easy being OCD, not when company is coming over.

By the way, some people—mean spirited, demon-possessed, totally evil people—like to go out of their way to agitate someone like me. At the last church I served, there was an annual Christmas progressive dinner. It was the custom, because of its close location to the church, for the parsonage to be the place where people would come for appetizers. As you might imagine, since it was the Christmas season, our house was decorated to the hilt, with two ornament-laden trees, various Nativity scenes, and an unbelievable amount of additional seasonal paraphernalia. My kids always would say that it was as if our house "threw up" Christmas.

When our so-called "guests" from the church arrived that fateful night, a night that will live in infamy, a group of them decided that it would be great fun to mess with our stuff—rearranging teapots and

other collectibles so that they no longer were in their correct geometric relationship on whatever piece of antique furniture they were displayed, hanging artwork upside down, hiding remote controls, moving decorative items from one part of the house to another, unscrewing light bulbs just enough so that wouldn't turn on, and even removing the handles from the bathroom doors.

Those people drove me crazy, and as you might imagine, I was a total wreck by the time they left our home to go on to the next one. I was so upset that I could not participate in the rest of the evening's festivities. I wasn't able to leave the house until things were restored to their proper place. And at the next Administrative Council meeting I announced that from that time on, the parsonage would be off limits to church events. Only by personal invitation could a church member set foot in our house for the remainder of my appointment as pastor.

It was the Martha Syndrome. I tended to confuse a good thing, the way the house looked for the Christmas party, with the best thing, the fellowship of church members at the party. I forgot the reason we were having the event in the first place. It wasn't to show off the house; it was to spend a nice portion of the evening with our friends.

All of us are guilty of the Martha Syndrome in some area of our lives. All of us are prone to substituting some good thing for the best thing. In school, obtaining a high GPA is a good thing, but it cannot

substitute for the best thing, which is actual education. In athletics, it is a good thing to win, but it is not the best thing that comes out of competition. In a career, it is a good thing to have success or financial reward, but isn't job satisfaction or a sense of fulfillment the best thing?

In volunteer work of any kind, recognition is a good thing, but having the opportunity to serve the community is the best thing about it. In management, such things as structure, protocol, control, and a chain of command can all be good things. But it can be disastrous when they are substituted for the best thing, which is productivity. For an institution, tradition is a good thing, but creative development, the best thing for any institution, can be stifled when tradition is substituted for it. For a corporation, profits are a good thing short-term, but the respectful and responsible treatment of consumers and the environment wind up being the best thing for business in the long run. In a relationship, having your needs met is a good thing, but a commitment to mutual growth is best.

What about in our religious life? Have we substituted a good thing for the best thing? I think we may have. I suspect that for many of us, it is the church that has been substituted for God. A good thing, the church, has taken the place in our lives of the best thing, God. In the way we practice our faith, we may be guilty of relating

intimately to the church, while remaining relative strangers to God. We have let our relationship to the church substitute for a relationship with God.

In Garrison Keillor's stories about Lake Wobegon, the name of the Catholic Church in the mythical Minnesota town always has intrigued me. It is Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church. Don't you hear just a hint of the Martha Syndrome in that name? Keillor knows a lot about being a church member. It is so easy in church work to get caught up in perpetual responsibility and religious busyness. There are committees to serve on; sermons and Sunday School lessons to prepare; events to plan, calendar, and coordinate; visits to make; fundraisers to facilitate; reports to complete; meetings to attend; music to rehearse; meals to prepare for families in the church dealing with a major illness or the death of a loved one; facilities to maintain.

But what is it that Jesus says to Martha? "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part (the best part), which will not be taken from her." A relationship with the church is a good thing. It is necessary for spiritual growth. Wesley taught us that there are no individual Christians; we need the opportunities for fellowship, education, worship, and missions only the church provides. We need the acceptance, the nurture, the support, the affirmation, the

encouragement, the empowerment, and the accountability that we can get only here. But *the church is not God*. A relationship with the church, as good as it is, cannot substitute for a relationship with God. In fact, the church actually can distract us and take our attention off of a relationship with God. I know it does for me. When we allow this kind of substitution to take place, we are guilty of the Martha Syndrome. We, like Martha, can confuse dutiful service *to* the Lord with what Mary chose to experience, a relationship *with* the Lord. And there is nothing, absolutely nothing better than that.