

A Sermon by the Reverend Deacon Crystal J. Hardin
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (C)
Sunday, July 21, 2019

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Consider the relationship between doing for and being with.¹ Both can look quite similar in outward appearance. Both can be facets of faithful service. Both can be rooted in good intentions.

But, at the end of the day, doing for another and being with another are fundamentally different in one key respect – where the focus lies.

Mother Teresa was remarkable in many ways, but it was her apparent devotion to the unwanted, the unloved, the uncared for that made her something of a celebrity, even amongst the unreligious. She could be held out as a shining example of a life spent doing for.

And yet, what she did for others, admirable as it might be, was but a mere consequence of a more fundamental orientation, her belongedness to Jesus.

It is said that Mother Teresa was once approached by a young monk who shared with her that his vocation was to work for lepers. “I want to spend myself for the lepers,” he said. As the story goes, she looked at him and replied, “Your vocation is not to work for lepers; your vocation is to belong to Jesus.”

Everything in our culture orients us to the immediacy of doing, solving, and fixing. Whether the problem is the world’s economy, our health, the woes at the border, the

¹ The Reverend Doctor Samuel Wells preached about this once, and the idea is one I haven’t been able to forget. As I sought out that sermon (which I still haven’t been able to find), I found this article, which articulates the same idea in a similar way. I highly recommend it. Samuel Wells, “Rethinking Service,” *The Cresset: A Review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs*, Easter 2013 (Vol LXXVI, No. 4), 6-14.

poor at our doorsteps, or the rifts in our own families, the story we tell ourselves is that it is our doing which is primary, which is critical.

Our doing defines us. Our doing condemns us. [It is] Our doing saves us.

Last week, Luke's Gospel (Luke 10:25-37) offered the story of a lawyer who sought to test Jesus. "Teacher, [he asked] what must I do to inherit eternal life," and Jesus confirmed that the lawyer indeed already knew the answer to his own question: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

We only get the story that follows, that of the Good Samaritan, because, as it turns out, "love God, love your neighbor" is not a sufficiently clear mandate on which to proceed when one is looking for what to do, especially when met with the complexity of daily life. More information is requested. "But who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers with the story of how to be a neighbor. While at first, it seems to be the story of doing for – of stopping and caring for an unknown man, left half dead on the street to Jericho – it is, in the end, a story of being with – of noticing, of being moved, of seeing the face of God in another, of drawing near in heart, mind, and body. It is the orientation of being with from which the doing for ultimately springs. And, that makes all the difference.

Today's Gospel, which immediately follows the story of the Good Samaritan offers another look at the relationship between doing for and being with:

In it, Jesus calls at the home of his friends, sisters Martha and Mary. Martha's first impulse seems to have been acts of traditional hospitality: readying a meal. While Martha worked, Mary took a spot at Jesus' feet, casting her full attention on Him.

It is not of little consequence that Mary's posture in this scene is one of a disciple, typically reserved for men. Luke's Gospel weaves a thread of expansiveness and inclusiveness, and we see that here. As the Reverend Elizabeth Keeler pointed out two weeks ago, "God's kingdom extends not just to a chosen few, but to Jews and Gentiles alike, men and women, those who are free and those who are enslaved. . . . What Jesus brings to the world is for everyone."² Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus follows that thread.

² The Reverend Elizabeth Keeler, Christ Church, Georgetown,
<https://www.christchurchgeorgetown.org/sites/default/files/Sermon%2C%20Proper%209C.pdf>

Mary sits. Martha works. And, as she does, she begins to grow distracted and resentful.

How many of us have been there, in the kitchen perhaps readying a meal for dinner guests? Working to get things just right for them. Perhaps we want them to be impressed by us. Perhaps we want them to enjoy themselves. Perhaps we want them to know how much we care about them. So, we do for them, even at the exclusion of being with them.

And then there's Mary. Isn't there always a Mary? You can hear her and your guests talking together, laughing, enjoying one another. She's doing nothing. You are doing everything. And, yet, the conversation, the laughter, the love seems all for her. Rather than addressing the insecurity and fear you suddenly feel, you begin to fixate on the injustice of it all. In the process, the potatoes boil over and you burn yourself on a pot as you try to salvage the meal. You become fed up. Enough is enough.

This is where Martha finds herself. The only thing left for her to do is to confront Jesus: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

And Jesus responds: "Martha, Martha. You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Martha, in all her doing for her house guest, her friend, her Lord, became preoccupied with herself. She failed to focus on Jesus.

The Reverend Doctor Samuel Wells remarks that "stories told with heroes at the center of them are told to laud the virtues of the heroes – for if the hero failed, all would be lost. By contrast, a saint can fail in a way the hero can't, because the failure of the saint reveals the forgiveness and the new possibilities made in God, and the saint is just a small character in a story that's always fundamentally about God."³

In the story Martha tells herself, she is the hero. There in that kitchen all of it depends on her. Even Jesus' intercession, if it is to come, will only come at her bidding, "Lord, do you not care? Tell her to help me."

³ As quoted in Rupert Shortt's, "God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation," (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 180. Wells speaks more about this dichotomy in his book "Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics," (Michigan: Brazos, 2004).

Mary's story, on the other hand and unbeknownst to her, is one of a saint. She is but a small character, a disciple at the feet of Jesus.

Martha, through self-preoccupation, has allowed worry and distraction to rob her of what mattered most, being with. Isn't that always the better part? Isn't that fundamental to the God we serve, Emanuel, God with us.

And yet, here is the grace. Jesus is not just in that home for Mary, who sits at his feet, he is there for Martha too. In the story of Jesus, somehow, we all get to be saints in the end. Because there is nothing about our collective story that isn't fundamentally about God.

Hear what our Epistle testifies to – *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him* (Col. 1:15-28).

As Mother Teresa, a saint before she was a Saint, says “your calling is to belong to Jesus. He has chosen you for himself, and work is only a means of love for him in action.”⁴

⁴ Mother Teresa, “Heart of Joy: The Transforming Power of Self-Giving,” (Michigan: Servant Pub, 1987), 104.