

Luke 10:38-42
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“Listening as an Act of Hospitality”

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The story of Mary and Martha brings the spiritual discipline of listening front and center today. Some research suggests that “Poor” listening actually costs us.

First of all it can cost us in real dollars. When 100,000 employees from 400 corporations in the US and UK were surveyed it was estimated that \$37 billion was the total cost of poor listening in the workplace.

Poor listening can also cost us life. One news story told of a power plant worker who died after being told not to use a particular elevator because a fire had broken out 5 stories up; but the worker didn't listen and was in the elevator when the fire caused the elevator shaft to explode. Another story told of an airline pilot who misinterpreted instructions to detour around an active runway while taxiing at Los Angeles International Airport. Her poor listening led to a two-plane runway crash, resulting in death and permanent injuries. Poor listening by healthcare workers is believed to contribute to death and injury numbering into the hundreds of thousands, with costs adding up to billions of dollars each year. And every parent knows how much safer their toddler would be if their child would listen.

And as we enter another most contentious election season, our desire to instantaneously demonize anyone who disagrees with us, before we listen to them, is eating away at any hope for civility in our commonwealth. When Police and Community members are involved in another shooting, we don't even finish the news report before our country has erupted into arguments about who was right and who was wrong. When Politicians from the other side of the aisle appear on our screen we change the channel before they say their first word. We are losing our ability to listen.

Today we meet Jesus as he arrives in the home of Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters; the three siblings were close friends of Jesus and he treasured their companionship and support. Their home was a refuge for Jesus, a place he could rest and receive physical nourishment after long days preaching, teaching, feeding and healing. As he arrives Martha goes into hospitality mode banging around in the kitchen, building a fire to cook food, cleaning dishes to make sure their friend Jesus, and the rest of the family have a good meal.

But Mary does something very, VERY unexpected. Something controversial in fact. She sits at the feet of Jesus and begins to listen, actively, deeply listen. Mary sat down in the place known to be “only for men.” As she sat there she would gently nod to indicate she heard what Jesus was saying. She occasionally spoke but only to reflect what she was hearing Jesus say. Mary gave her body, mind and soul to Jesus. In this story Mary reminds us Listening is a spiritual discipline, and listening is as much an act of hospitality as preparing a meal.

The tension in this story comes because Martha is doing what is expected of her religiously and socially, while Mary is breaking all the rules, yet Jesus says on this particular day, Mary has chosen the better part. If we lift this story out of context we might be tempted to reduce the Christian life to Contemplation, merely listening to Jesus is all faithful disciples need to do.

But here context is most helpful. The story immediately before this one is the parable of the Good Samaritan where we are taught how helping each other is an act of grace and faithfulness, even if they are our sworn enemy, actually especially when they are our sworn enemy. Serving is at the heart of that parable, now with this story of Mary and Martha Jesus is completing the picture. Yes serving others is a part of spiritual discipleship but, equally important is task of listening to and soaking in God's word. Most scholars agree "serving" is not the problem in this story. The problem, like the problem with the Priest and the Levite who pass by the beaten man, is distraction. UCC pastor Rev. Kate Huey writes, "Martha's task centered approach to hospitality distracts her from the actual person she is welcoming, while Mary's focus on Jesus is single-minded."

A colleague tells of a time he was part of an advisory group to the chaplains at a major University. The advisory group's job was to listen to reports from the chaplains, and ask questions. An older member of the council asked the chaplains, "What are the University students like morally these days?" The group of chaplains looked around at each other, after a pause one said, "Well, I think you'd be basically pleased. The students are pretty ambitious in terms of their careers, but that's not all they are. A lot of them tutor kids after school. Some work in a night shelter, others in soup kitchen, and so forth."

As she talked a Jewish member of the advisory committee who was listening, began to grin. The more she talked, the bigger he grinned, until it became distracting, the female chaplain asked, "Am I saying something funny?" The council member replied, "No, I'm sorry... I was just sitting here thinking. You are saying that the university students are good people, and you're right. And you're saying that they are involved in good social causes, and they are. But what I was thinking is the one thing they lack is a vision of Salvation." Everyone looked at him, "No, it's true.... If you don't have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can't get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down."

I invite you to turn to someone sitting near you and repeat this ... "If you don't have some vision of what God is doing, ----- it finally beats you down.-----"

Mary sits at Jesus' feet, defying tradition, and allows herself to steep in God's Word. She listens to God's Vision. Without God's word and vision we cannot go on preparing meals of hospitality like Martha. It will finally distract us, anger us, exhaust us, and beat us down. With God's Word though, we can prepare meals for the hungry, care for the sick, show hospitality to the stranger and immigrant, march for improvements to Police and Community relations and make faithful selections of our political candidates, as we are renewed in God's word we find new strength to keep on loving and living in the name of Christ Jesus.

In the first chapter of the Letter of James, verses 19-21, we hear, “Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn’t produce God’s righteousness. Therefore, with humility. . . welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.”

Amen