

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

THE BETTER PART OF GOD

Luke 10:38-42

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

38Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

DIAGNOSIS: Distracted By Everything

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Absorbed in Work and Play*

Everyone who has ever lived is, like Martha, absorbed in many beneficial "tasks" (in v. 40 the Greek word *diakonia*, meaning "services" or "servings," is repeated in the same verse and translated as "work." In its narrow domestic setting, the word means "household duties," but when expanded to the household of God it is typically translated as "ministry" or in its verb form "to minister"). These tasks are indicative of the "many things" (v. 41) we do, no matter how mundane or noble they appear. How we love to build things up, every thing, through work and play!

Not only do we work and play for ourselves, of course, but we also work and play for the benefit of others. Let the truth be told: in all these tasks, we work and play for God! We are all ministers of God, “caring” (v. 40) for God’s creation wherever we find ourselves. How, then, can such work and play, even such godly ministry, be a “distraction” (vv. 40-41)?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Absorbed in Ourselves*

Martha’s question to Jesus, if or in what manner he “cares” about her daily servings to others, her ministry, is really self serving. Even if they are to benefit others, they are also for her own benefit, her own security. Yet she is “worried” (v. 41) by these “things” because they are never quite done, or not done well enough. Their fulfillment is illusive because they depend upon us to do them, trusting as we do in our own abilities and coercive powers over others. And if ever our successes (or our successive tasks) seem complete, even briefly, we have at best only succeeded in distracting ourselves from the “one thing” (v. 42) that Jesus says is most needful.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Absorbed by the Law*
Like Martha with her “many tasks,” we cannot escape our own self absorptions. As we rightly attend to God’s Law, that is, his command to “care” for each other (in this text under the rubric diakonia), we are necessarily and absolutely absorbed in our own work, that is, in literally every thing. Trusting in ourselves, we cannot see God at work in our work; but if we do, we only see God’s judgment in our work. Thus: the Law condemns us to see only our failures, and blinds us to God’s mercy in Jesus. This is the terrible conundrum of the Law that God has placed before us. So long as our “work” depends on ourselves, in our own powers, we will never notice God’s “better part” (v. 42) displayed apart from the Law.

PROGNOSIS: Distracted By Nothing

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Better Part*

If what Jesus says is true, then there is just "one thing" needful to escape the conundrum of the Law. God's "better part" is the Word of the Lord to which Mary was attending, despite her many household tasks (which are not relinquished because they remain God's command). But if Jesus' promissory word of forgiveness is true (see 11:4, the Lord's Prayer; see also 24:13-49), then the One Word, the "one thing" needed to end the Law's condemnations, is close at hand, as near as Jesus' voice speaking to Martha. In Jesus' death and resurrection, to which his voice finally refers as the actuality of God's forgiveness, God breaks the Law's terrible hold on us and releases us from our own self-serving distractions.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Absorbed in Jesus*

In the power of God through the Holy Spirit, those who are held fast in the Law are freed to "listen" to (v. 39) and trust in God's "better part," that is, Jesus' Word of forgiveness. Like Mary wholly absorbed in Jesus' Word, the Law's condemnations are no longer final and thus no longer worrisome. The Law no longer distracts us from God's forgiveness. This "better part" of God "will not be taken away" (v. 42), either from Mary or from us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Absorbed in God's Service*

Now that the forgiveness of sins has been given to us, every so-called work that we do (with faith in Christ) is no longer judged according to our own self-absorptions but by our freedom in Christ to love one another with God's own limitless love (for which there is no condemnation). The better part of God has triumphed over the Law! Holding fast to God's promise in Jesus, we are freed to serve one another wholly, without needless self-

serving distractions. Now, every thing that we do is a “service” of love; a service that is different from works of the Law because that service does not hold onto the works themselves, but defers every thing to the One who is God’s love incarnate. Because we remain sinners the Law continues to press its case against us unto death; but now the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit, that is, faith in Christ, assures us that God’s forgiveness is God’s “better” and final Word.