

HEARING AND DOING (Luke 10:38-42)

In case you hadn't noticed, we are halfway through summer, which means it's the height of vacation time.

I remember one of the first vacations Nancy and I took. We went to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. We had a house right on the beach, with a great view of the ocean, just a few steps down to the water. The first morning we were there I walked out on the deck and asked Nance "What do you want to do today?" She looked up from the recliner where she was reading and said – rather icily, I thought – "I'm doing it". Right then I realized we had very different ideas of what vacations are all about.

What kind of vacationer are you? There are Mary vacationers and there are Martha vacationers. It turns out I'm a Martha vacationer. I like to be doing something. It doesn't have to be six countries in five days or hang gliding one day and rock climbing the next, but I don't like to just go and lie around. But there are Mary vacationers who want to do just that, who want to get away from it all and whose idea of a great vacation is lying on a beach doing nothing more strenuous than putting on sunblock and turning over once in a while. Serenity and relaxation are what it's all about for them.

Those are stereotypes, of course. It doesn't have to be either-or. The best are probably both-and with a bit of each. Even I've learned to compromise.

It might seem that today's reading from Luke is holding up Mary as a model for the Christian life and that it's putting down Martha – saying that sitting and listening is more important than cooking a meal or putting out the welcome mat.

This is such a simple story. And taken by itself, the message seems pretty clear. But preaching on it's like walking through a minefield. What makes it so scary? Simply this: Just imagine a church that's all Marys and no Marthas. It has nothing to do with gender, of course. But suppose everyone simply decided that henceforth they were going to commit themselves 100% to study and prayer and contemplation, all those good things. Who would make sure there was a fellowship hour after worship? Who would greet visitors? Who would put on ham-and-bean suppers? Who would collect food for Lazarus House? Who would do the 101 other things that need to be done around the church? In other words, how would the church ever get along without the Marthas who roll up their sleeves and pitch in when something needs to be done?

No preacher in his or her right mind would ever suggest that the church could get along without them. So that can't be what Jesus is saying.

It helps to put this story in context. You may remember that last Sunday the gospel lesson was the parable of the good Samaritan. But do you remember what prompted Jesus to tell that story? A lawyer asked him a question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus didn't answer him, "You don't have to do

anything.” Instead, he told a story about someone who did something, a story of love in action, a story that teaches us what it means to love our neighbor.

Today’s lesson comes immediately after Jesus tells the parable and instructs the lawyer to “go and *do likewise*.” So it helps to read these two stories together. One isn’t complete without the other.

Let’s go back to Jesus and the lawyer. The lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do?” and Jesus in turn asks him a question: “What does it say in the law?” And he gives the right answer: “Love God with all your heart and strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

The parable of the good Samaritan teaches what it means to love our neighbor – and there’s nothing passive or inactive about that love. Love of neighbor moves us to action, it moves us to do something. In the parable it’s the guys who do nothing – the priest and the Levite who spent their days in study and contemplation – who come up short.

So if the parable is about what it means to love our neighbor, today’s lesson shifts the focus to what it means to love God. I kind of wish Luke had put this story first, before the parable, because then it would be clear that loving our neighbor is a way of showing our love for God, a way of demonstrating our love for God and making it real.

But Luke put them in this order, and maybe he did it for a reason. Maybe he did it to teach us that all our efforts, all our doing, all our good deeds – all our Martha impulses – need to be balanced and nourished by times of doing absolutely nothing but sitting and being with God – that those Martha-like impulses need some Mary-like quiet to keep them focused.

We live in a society that equates busyness with importance. How many people today wouldn’t dream of leaving their computer and iPhone or Blackberry at home when they go on vacation? They’ve got to check messages a half dozen times a day. Jesus could have been speaking to them when he said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.”

One of my best memories from last summer was spending an afternoon at the Zen Mountain Monastery in the Catskills meditating with the monks – emptying my mind of to-do lists and simply sitting and being in that quiet moment.

Henri Nouwen once wrote that our lives may be full, but they’re seldom fulfilled. “Our occupations and preoccupations,” he said, “fill our external and internal lives to the brim. They prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives.” In other words, our busyness, even when we’re being busy for God, gets in the way of our having a relationship with God.

Have you ever noticed how things change during a power outage? Unless it’s the dead of winter, people actually go out of their houses and walk down the street and talk to their neighbors – things we’re usually too busy to do until things beyond our control force us to slow down.

You might think that the church would understand the need for balance. But we’re not very good at it, either. There was a church in our association in Connecticut where there was never a silent moment. Even when the preacher

was walking from his chair to the pulpit, the organist played some kind of traveling music.

When I build some silence into the pastoral prayer, I'm always conscious of how long it seems and wonder how long I can let it go before you start getting antsy.

Protestants generally are big on the Word. But how can we hear God still speaking if we don't stop now and then and just sit and listen. Matthew King, a Lakota elder, said that when he prayed, he liked to get the talking over with quick so he could listen. How can the still-speaking God get a word in edgewise over all the electronic noise that bombards us and over all the words we bombard God with. The still-speaking God expects a still-listening people.

The point is that it's not either-or, it's not hearing OR doing. It's hearing AND doing. If we're so busy with our doing that we can't stop and hear, how are we going to know what we're supposed to do? Our hearing has to inform and direct our doing. It's by hearing and doing that, in the words of the lawyer, we inherit eternal life.

Which doesn't mean going to heaven when we die. For Jesus, eternal life begins right here. Eternal life is the kind of fulfilled life Henri Nouwen had in mind. Let me end with the words of Barbara Brown Taylor: "To hear Jesus talk about it, eternal life also means hitting the jackpot now; eternal life means enjoying a breadth and depth and sweetness of life that is available right this minute and not only after we've breathed our last...Let the summer showers of God's love soak the seeds of your right answers so that they blossom into right actions and watch the landscape begin to change. Just do it, and find out that when you do, you do live, and live abundantly, just like the man said."