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"Claiming One's Own Faith"

Luke 10:38-42

This story of Mary and Martha follows the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel. I will look at both of them and how they relate to one another this morning. Both stories can only be found in Luke's gospel and both stories illustrate the barrier-breaking that is characteristic of how Luke portrays Jesus. The hero of the Good Samaritan is, of course, a Samaritan - a member of an ethnic and social class looked down upon by the Jews at the time of Jesus. In our text, Mary is the "hero" so to speak. Against the social mores of her time she, a woman, is sitting and listening to the teaching of Jesus. She then is a disciple of Jesus. Martha, however, wants Jesus to tell her to get up and help her to serve the guests. Yet Jesus affirms her decision to sit and listen, saying the "she has chosen the good portion." Since Martha is serving it is apparent that guests are eating and drinking while Jesus is speaking. It brings to mind another teaching of Jesus that "Man can not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." It is this word from God that separates us from the beasts. We must have food in order to survive, yet there must be something beyond mere survival for our lives to have purpose and meaning. The text does not say what Jesus is teaching in that moment, but obviously, it has some meaning to Mary.

Now Martha was "distracted" and not attuned to what was going on with Mary. She is not attuned to the fact that Mary is engrossed in something edifying. You know, Martha gets a bad rap here. This is a common error even today. Women commit it during football and basketball games all the time. But here, Martha is really, in a sense, the "good girl." She has already pushed the boundaries of societal acceptability by being a woman that receives Jesus, a man, into her home. Now she is observing good social etiquette by serving her guests and her sister Mary has left her to do it all alone. Taken in this light, her request to ask Jesus to tell Mary to help is really not all that unreasonable. Yet she is either unaware or unconcerned with what is going on with Mary. We don't know the people involved and we only know what we are told so we can't be sure of the motive of her request. It could be that she was jealous of her sister sitting and listening while she was serving. Perhaps she thought her sister was observing bad etiquette. Or maybe she was frustrated because she felt she needed more help. We can't say for sure, but Jesus' response to her is that he sensed she was "anxious and troubled by many things." Understandable or not, I do think it's a fair critique to say that Martha was focused more on herself than on Mary. But on this score, all of us have been guilty.

Well, today is Father's Day, and I do have two boys of my own - Wilson and Warren. Wilson is 4 years old. Warren is almost 2. As big brothers are prone to do, Wilson will shove down Warren from time to time and will occasionally rear back and give him a good hard slap. It seems little brothers need to be reminded of their place. This is obviously a behavior I do not want to encourage. Therefore, I experiment with ways to discourage it - a pop on the rear (if I catch him the act), sending him to his room, taking away the toy he may have used as a weapon, getting him to apologize to his brother. But when I paid close attention, I noticed that something else was going on. Since Wilson is older he is able to focus more on what he is doing than Warren. He gets into it. So while Warren will copy Wilson for a while, he will eventually wander off and do something else. After a time he will come strutting over me, bow-legged with a big smile on his face looking for love, praise, and affirmation. He then, of course, gets it. My father and I were talking the other day and we noticed that it is often after Warren receives such positive attention that he receives this attention of a different sort from Wilson. Wilson does not yet know how to properly respond to the feelings of jealousy he gets when Warren receives praise, so he responds by physically punishing him. The

feeling may generally be unwarranted, but he still experiences it. Nevertheless, what Wilson also needs is to feel loved too, to feel special himself. For me that awareness is helpful. It tells me that even as I work on getting him not to shove and hit that I need to be sure that he knows how special he is to me.

Claiming our faith is in many ways similar to growing up. It is a process. We have to learn how to deal with our feelings of inadequacy. And we need to have the belief that we are special and loved in the eyes of God. While growing up much of who we are is the result of what we take in from our surroundings. Commonly called socialization, this essentially involves internalizing the messages we receive from home, school, church, and culture at large. This process continues as we grow up. To some degree, we are all products of our culture. What happens next is that there is a tendency to judge ourselves based on the cultural messages we have internalized. We then begin to judge ourselves in regards to these "values," and we determine where we think we stack up with others. And last, we begin to feel good or bad about ourselves accordingly. Likewise, faith starts from the outside. We are told what to believe and generally we believe it. But until we can have some understanding of it and can act upon it is not really our own.

Recently, in our Monday morning staff meetings we have taken turns sharing about our faith journey and how we got to where we are. One of the things I shared when it was my turn was when I begin to embrace faith in God on my own. During my early to mid teenage years, like most teenagers, I was preoccupied with myself, where I fit in, and how I was perceived by others. And consequently I did things that I thought would make me look cool or fit in. Sometimes I didn't even really like these things or feel good about doing them. Yet something within me eventually became dissatisfied with this. After a while, when I was 17, the question dawned on me, "Why am I doing things to impress others who in many cases don't really care about me?" Couples of months or so later, when I was in my room by myself at summer camp, I remember praying "God I don't want to do this anymore, I want to do your will." At that point I began making adjustments in my attitudes and behavior. Strangely, my curfew was lifted shortly thereafter as well. But it was a turning point for me. For the first time, in turning to God, I had the strength to not have my behavior determined by others.

If you asked me when I became a Christian, I would point back to this time when I was 17. To use religious language, that was when I was "born again." I know this term may have negative connotations for some of you because of it has abused on occasion, but at face value it is a good metaphor. It is about moving from the self conferred by culture toward the self one finds in God. Yet this process of living into this new identity takes time. And the process is not automatic. We can and do thwart it from time to time. We can even use religion to do so. I mentioned earlier the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable was told to a lawyer who asked Jesus "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He was told essentially told to love God and his neighbor. Then "wanting to justify himself" the lawyer asks Jesus "And who is my neighbor?" Though he has fully observed the letter of the law, he is still engaged in the sort of self-preoccupation that I've already described. For the lawyer the focus is really not on God or his neighbor but on himself. Yet this is an ongoing struggle for all of us. It's not a battle we can win once and for all. Jesus tells us to "pick up your cross daily and follow me." Dying to one way of living and opening up to another is a daily undertaking. Yet Jesus also says that "I have come that you might have fullness of life." The life of faith is not about self-abuse, it's about nurturing the part of ourselves which finds its identity in God, rather than the external trappings we might present to the world. Spirituality, growing in faith, is essentially about cultivating a deeper trust in God.

A Methodist pastor named James Moore wrote of his experience some years ago of being on staff and working under D.L. Dykes. He shared a story of when he and several others on staff came

up with what they thought was an exciting program idea. They were certain it would be great, but was going to take time, effort, and more resources than they currently had. To obtain the additional resources they were going to need the approval of the church's administrative board. So they put together a proposal for the board. And finally, the night came for the staff to present the proposal. They wanted to "wow" the board with their presentation. Just before the meeting D.L. suggested that they go to the sanctuary and pray. Everyone thought it was a good idea, so they went to the sanctuary and they prayed. The staff began to pray like this: "Lord, give us the right words to say in the right spirit. Give us the power of persuasion. Help us to show the board how important this program is. Open their hearts, Lord, let them be receptive..." and so on.

In similar manner each of them prayed and when they got through, quietly and humbly, D.L. began to pray: "Father if this be your will, bless us with success. If it is not your will, bless us with failure." James initially wanted to shake him and say "don't say that." But obviously, these words and attitude made an impact on James. Twenty years later James Moore remembered D.L.'s exact words.

Every Sunday we pray the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done." Prayer is not some attempt to get God to do what we think he ought to do. Prayer is to come to God in trust and humility seeking understanding. We cannot make God an instrument of our will, but we can choose to be open to God's will so far as we can understand it. Indeed, the entire process of growing in our faith has to do with aligning ourselves with God's will. We are then actually claiming faith in God.

Let's return to our text of Mary and Martha and the previous story of the lawyer told the parable of the Good Samaritan. Both push the boundaries of who can be included in the Kingdom of God (a woman, a Samaritan), but they illustrate different facets of what it means to participate in the Kingdom of God. Upon hearing the story of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer is told to "go and do likewise," to have mercy on others, to have compassion for others. Whereas Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen "the good portion" and that it is OK for her to sit and listen. She does not need to be up and doing. Both are important - the doing and the listening. Yet the listening, the understanding is generally a good prerequisite for the doing. I believe that's why our church has hired a consultant. On a personal level understanding is also needed if we going to act out of compassion.

I recently saw a PBS video with a moving real-life story. It began with two men sitting on stage together at a local school. As they were introduced the speaker pointed and said, "This man's grandson killed this man's son." The two men went on to share what happened. 20 year old Tariq Khamisa studied art at San Diego State. He was an honor student who worked part-time delivering pizzas to earn some extra money for school. Late one afternoon when he was delivering a pizza he was approached by a teenage boy. 14 year old Tony Hicks held a gun and told Tariq to give him the pizza. Tariq refused. Tony shot and killed Tariq. Tariq's father, Azim Khamisa could hardly believe the news. Tariq's mother was angry that her son was killed over a pizza. Yet somehow, amidst his shock and grief, Azim understood that their were victims on both sides of the gun. One was the victim of an assailant and that assailant was a victim of society. As Tony confessed his guilt in court, his grandfather, Ples Felix looked on. Among other things Tony said, "For as long as I live I pray to God to give Mr. Khamisa strength to deal with his loss."

We then learn of Tony's past. A few years earlier, he had seen his cousin gunned down in the streets. When he was born, his 15 year old mother didn't want him and his dad was nowhere to be found. His aunts and uncles were all pretty much in gangs, dealing drugs, or in jail. Tony cried when recounting the realization that neither of his parents wanted him. His grandfather, Ples Felix, was the only one who had shown Tony any love and Tony had betrayed that love by shooting Tariq Khamisa.

Azim Khamisa, a Sufi Muslim, consulted his local Imam about how to deal with his grief. He was told that it was proper to grieve for his son for 40 days, but then what he needed to do was a good deed. So Azim decided to start the Tariq Khamisa Foundation - a foundation with the goal of helping young people not to resort to killing and violence. Azim asked Tony's grandfather, Ples, a Baptist from the South, if he would help him out. Ples responded, "Of course. That's an answer to my prayer. I will do anything to support you and your family." The two now travel around to schools preaching the message of forgiveness. Their message is that forgiveness is not only something you do for someone else, but also something you do for yourself. Holding onto anger only hurts you, and revenge will not recover your loss. Forgiveness helps everyone involved in more ways than they can imagine.

Tony is now in prison serving 25 to life. Azim is asking that his sentence be reduced. Azim has forgiven Tony and offered him a job at the foundation once he is released. Azim's forgiveness has allowed Tony to let go of his inner resentment for his parents not being there. Tony's words were, "I had a man forgive me for taking the life of his son, the least I can do is to forgive those who have wronged me or have not been there for me in my life." Azim and Felix are now best friends and consider each other as a brother. There was nothing Azim could do to bring back his son. Yet Azim took the time to understand before he acted out of revenge. And his actions effectively demonstrated the answer to the question "and who is my neighbor?" He is the young man who killed my son. He is that boy's grandfather. He is all the youth who live in an environment that makes them susceptible to violence.

Azim Khamisa was able to take a tragedy and turn it into a positive. I'm sure he's love his son back, but he did claim his faith in the most difficult of circumstances. Faith is not something we claim for once and for all. Really it's about remaining open to God's claim on us. It's about paying attention to what guides our behavior. It's about being attentive to each other, understanding each other. It's about finding our deepest selves in God, and trusting God. And it's about learning to act out of compassion.