

Doers of the Word

Luke 10:38-42, James 1:22, James 2:26

October 27, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

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Seven years ago, I preached a sermon here on the story of Mary and Martha that we just heard. I'm sure that most of you don't remember that sermon, but I think Paula does, because she asked me about it, years later. This morning, I want to begin with the story I told then, a story about my grandmother, but this time I will take it in a different direction.

You know that when I was a little girl, I went to church with my grandmother. She was a devout Southern Baptist, and most of what I know about God and church and living faithfully, I learned from her. She took me to church three times a week; she taught me to put something in the offering plate whenever I was there; and she quizzed me on the children's weekly Bible verse, to make sure I learned it.

Besides teaching my sister and me, my grandmother also taught Sunday school and sang in the choir. It seemed she was always busy with church work of one kind or another. In fact, the church absolutely depended on my grandmother and on men and women like her – people of deep faith who could be counted on to do whatever needed to be done. Does that sound like anyone you know? Like anyone in this room? Maybe even you?

My grandmother was hard-working and dependable because she believed that this is what God expects of all of us. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop," she would say. If you asked my grandmother whether she was saved by faith or by works, she would answer "faith" every time, but I think that deep-down, she suspected that God loved her for her hard work. Whatever her theology, she was first and foremost a faithful Christian who earnestly tried to do what she thought God expected her to do.

One Sunday, I sat next to my grandmother in church and listened to a sermon about today's Gospel text – the story of Mary and Martha. The preacher went on and on about how shortsighted Martha was for being so busy when Jesus was right there in the house, and he praised Mary for setting aside household tasks to listen to the Lord.

From the time the scripture was read until the end of the sermon, I could feel my grandmother beside me, getting angrier and angrier. Finally, she clinched her teeth and whispered, "Martha doesn't get enough credit, if you ask me. Somebody's got to do all that work!"

My grandmother's name was Ouida Ethel, but in her heart, she was a Martha. I like that image, actually. Martha was a strong and important woman. It was Martha's home that Jesus came to in this story, not Mary's and – interestingly – not the home of a man, as Luke tells it. Martha was the host for Jesus and the disciples for who-knows-how-many days. I'm sure some of you have recently hosted friends and family, and you know how much work this is. Imagine all the work of hosting 13 people at your house for the next week or so.

Jesus and all those disciples depended on Martha to get the work done, just as my grandmother's church depended on her and others like her to keep the church running. And I would bet that, like my grandmother, Martha usually enjoyed being the one you could depend on. Like my grandmother, Martha probably believed that this is what God expected of her. Like my grandmother, Martha probably suspected that God loved her BECAUSE she was always busy.

But on this particular day, Martha has had enough. Her lazy, spacy sister Mary is getting all of Jesus' attention, and Martha is stuck in the kitchen with all those dishes and no help. She complains to Jesus, but he scolds her and tells her that Mary made the better choice.

Now, you have to know that I am a Martha, too, because I just want to shout to Jesus and all those disciples, "Martha would have plenty of time to sit and listen if any of you would bother to make a bed or dry a dish. When did all this work get to belong just to her?"

James would have been on Martha's side, too. "Be doers of the word," he wrote, "and not hearers only," and "faith without works is dead." James asked, "If someone says they have faith, and they meet someone who is naked and hungry but do not offer them clothing or food, what good is their faith?"

I chose these scripture passages today because this is Reformation Sunday, and I am doing a little counter-programming. Martin Luther hated the passages I chose today, and he would probably hate this sermon, too.

The Reformation is the celebration of Martin Luther's proclamation that we are saved by faith alone as a free gift of God, not something that can be earned. Luther would have been on Mary's side in this story, and he loved Paul, who wrote again and again that we are saved by grace through faith, as a free gift of God that we cannot possibly earn. Luther absolutely despised the Book of James. He thought it should literally be ripped out of every Bible. He especially hated the two passages that we read this morning: Be doers of the word, and faith without works is dead.

This tug of war between faith and works (or "faith" and "action") has marked the history of the Church from the very beginning. I have already told you that I am a Martha. I put great value on what people do, and I believe that much is expected of me in my daily life. But I have to admit that when we focus only on our actions and not at all on faith, great abuses and corruption can occur. This is what happened just before the Reformation, when the Church was selling indulgences – sort of "get out of hell free" cards – to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther was incensed! You can't earn salvation by the action of giving money, he said. It is your faith that matters.

On the other hand, if we focus only on faith, then what do we do with all of Jesus' injunctions to us to feed those who are hungry, give water to people who thirst, welcome strangers, clothe those who are naked, take care of the sick, and visit prisoners? If faith is all that matters, and our actions are of no consequence, do we just get rid of the 25th chapter of Matthew? And who will take care of these children of God if we do not?

So, we are left with the question, what does God expect of us? Only to have faith in the resurrected Christ, as Paul says and as Luther argues? Or does it matter to God what we do? Do our actions have to match our faith, as James says?

In the tug of war between faith and action, when one side wins and the other side loses, it leads to abuse and corruption on both ends. Only in the middle, where faith and action meet, can God's love flourish.

Jesus was right to tell Martha to take a break. We can't earn our way into God's favor by doing all the work. If the dinner is a little late, maybe someone else will stir the pot for a while. And James (who was Jesus' brother, by the way) was right to say that what we do does matter.

So, let us give thanks for those whose faith is displayed in faithful living. My grandmother said through clenched teeth, "Martha doesn't get enough credit if you ask me. Somebody's got to do all that work." Today, before you leave church, please find one of the many Marthas in this church and say thank you. Thank them for singing in the choir every week or making sure that the paraments and candles are ready for worship. Thank them for teaching Sunday School or mowing the grass or making coffee or baking cookies or calling around to find ushers and liturgists month after month. Say thank you. Better yet, sign up to do some of those things next month so all the Marthas can have a break and just sit and listen for a week or two, as Mary did.

And let us continue to express our faith in the way we "do church" – in the missions we support with our dollars and with our time, in the ways we use our building and our parking lot and our meadow. Let us express our faith in the prayers we offer and the songs we sing. May all the people around us always be able to look at this church and see our faith in everything we do.

Amen