

Sermon for July 20 – 8 a.m. Service
The Reverend Norah Fisher
Luke 10:38-42

I am going to begin with a song. Don't worry. I'm not going to sing. Perhaps I should say that I am going to begin with a song title. I'm not going to ask you how many of you remember the song. It might say something about your age. The song is titled simply, "Sisters." It's a classic Irving Berlin tune much beloved by previous generations. It begins by describing how devoted two sisters are to one another. But its famous refrain goes like this: "Lord, help the mister who comes between me and my sister and Lord help the sister who comes between me and my man."

Why Jesus chose to get involved in a spat between two sisters, I haven't any idea. He should have known better. Experts tell us that, with regard to sibling relationships, sisters have much more intense feelings toward one another, both positive and negative, than brothers do or brothers and sisters do with each other.¹

Why would Jesus want to step into a minefield like that? Not only did he risk alienating one or both of these sisters, but in rendering his thoughts on their situation he alienated every older sister with a less responsible younger sister who has lived since. Some of you know what I'm talking about.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem. But first they take a little side trip to a little village called Bethany. There they spent some time in the home of a woman named Martha. Notice I didn't say "in the home of Mary and Martha." Luke tells us that this was Martha's house. Perhaps Martha was a widow. That might explain how she happened to own a house, not a common occurrence in that day. This also may explain why Martha is often thought of as the older sister and the fact that she seems more responsible.

Now I'm getting myself in trouble. Being both a younger sister and an older sister, I know that younger sisters are not always irresponsible. However, studies of the effects of birth order on how people conduct their lives suggest that older children are generally more responsible.

At least that is the contention of Dr. Kevin Leman in *The Birth Order Book, Why You Are The Way You Are*. It is a book on family dynamics and sibling relationships. Dr. Leman maintains birth order often presages accomplishment in life. The first born is the achiever, the middle sibling goes along, and the baby craves and gets all the

¹ Francine Klagsbrun, *Mixed Feelings* (New York: Bantam, 1992), p. 97.

attention. The oldest and youngest often have this love/hate rivalry, says Dr. Leman. Leman must have been an older brother himself. He says the original title of his book was “Abel Had It Coming.”²

Differences in sibling performance is at least partly because each sibling is treated just a little differently from earlier siblings. One woman said she has five siblings, three sisters and two brothers. One night she said she was chatting with her mother about how her mother had changed over the years from the first child to the last. Her mother agreed she had mellowed a lot.

“When your oldest sister coughed or sneezed, I called the ambulance,” said this mother. “However, when your youngest brother swallowed a dime, I just told him it was coming out of his allowance.”

Parents do mellow. Sometimes younger siblings can seem just a little spoiled. It is a stereotype, of course, and in that sense it is unfair. But some of you who are older children can relate to this story of Mary and Martha, particularly those of you with younger siblings who are perhaps more, shall we say, adventurous.

Anyway Jesus visits Martha’s house. Hospitality was a big deal in biblical times, and Martha, whose name means “lady” or “mistress of the house,” was a person who took entertaining guests seriously. Especially entertaining Jesus. Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus were some of Jesus’ closest friends. So she gladly opened her home to him.

Of course, that meant opening her home to his twelve disciples as well. This meant entertaining thirteen hungry men, at least twelve of whom were used to having women wait on them hand and foot. The disciples probably did very little to help. Here again, we are dealing with stereotypes. But some of you were brought up in a world where there was men’s work and there was women’s work. Men didn’t help very much with cooking or cleaning. It was no different back then.

Can you imagine the burden that Martha must have been under? She took pride in filling her role well. She wanted to excel as a host and as a housekeeper. Many of us really admire Martha. We can relate to her.

Well, Martha’s sister Mary was evidently of a different temperament than Martha. In fact, she may have been a bit rebellious. I say that, not because of the common stereotype of the younger sibling, but of something quite extraordinary that Mary did. We read these words about Mary “sitting at the Lord’s feet listening to what he

² THE JOKESMITH, Volume XXIII, Number 2, Spring, 2006.

said,” and they don’t seem too significant, except that she wasn’t helping her older sister. But her actions may have had great significance.

In biblical times, to sit at a rabbi’s feet meant that you were receiving formal training with him as his disciple in the same way that St. Paul sat at the feet of the famed teacher Gamaliel when he was a young man (Acts 22:3). Invariably these teaching situations involved only males. In other words, instead of helping her sister, Mary had gone off into the study for a teaching time with the men while Martha prepared the meal. Mary was intruding herself as an equal into a man’s world.

As one commentator notes, “That Jesus would encourage her to listen to him as he taught in the house was, in itself, radical. Women were openly despised by the Judaism of the time. Women were exempt from the study of the Torah. Many rabbis actively discouraged women from learning. The Mishnah, which was compiled not long after New Testament times, includes some pretty cynical thoughts about women. In one place it says, ‘May the words of the Torah be burned, they should not be handed over to women.’ Rabbi Eliezer who lived about 90 AD said, ‘If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery.’”³

One rabbi of the time said it was more profitable to teach your dog the Scripture than your wife. If you think that fundamentalist Muslims have a dim view of women, it is not that much different from the orthodox view in Jesus’ time. So, Mary’s actions of going in and sitting at Jesus’ feet were really quite astonishing.

This was not what upset Martha, however. She was upset that Mary had left her to do all the work. Evidently this has happened before. Notice that she doesn’t even bother to talk with Mary directly about her feelings. She probably knew that it wouldn’t do any good. Instead, she went to Jesus. “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

It was a cry of frustration. It is the cry of every responsible person who has to pull more of the load because there are others who will not do their fair share. It happens not only in homes, but in the workplace, in civic organizations, and even the church. Some people seem to carry a heavier load simply because they are by nature more responsible, more reliable, more committed.

I don’t believe for a moment that Jesus loved Mary more than Martha, nor did he treasure her devotion more than Martha’s. Jesus knew that the world could not function without people like Martha. Our families certainly couldn’t function without people like Martha. I know our church couldn’t function without people like

³ Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/10_38-42.htm.

Martha. Thank God for them and for her. And I am sure Jesus appreciated Martha's efforts.

But this was an important time in Jesus' ministry. He knew something that Martha did not. He knew his time with them was short. There wouldn't be many more opportunities for them to be together. And so, with love in his eyes and a tender smile on his lips, Jesus said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

I believe Jesus was saying to Martha, "Martha, you have so many things on your mind, but right now I need you to focus on just one thing. There will be other times when Mary can help you with the housework. Right now I need for you both to hear what I have to say about the coming Kingdom."

Jesus was not denigrating Martha's role as the mistress of the house. If he had, he and his disciples would go hungry. He was simply saying that there is a time and a place for everything, and right now he needed them to focus on his mission from the Father.

There is a time for work and a time for worship. That is what Christ is saying to us. A successful life is balanced.

We have some people today who are all work. Some of them are quite successful professionally. And no wonder! They work eighty hours a week, but look at what it has done for them: the beautiful home, the expensive automobile, the cabin on the lake. But some of them have made this commitment to constant work at the cost of their souls, at the cost of their families, sometimes at the cost of their health. Certainly, they don't have time to worship. Often, they will say that, because they work so hard, Sunday is the only time they have for their family. As if it is a virtue to neglect either faith or family because of your work.

Theologian William Stringfellow tells the story of a friend who graduated at the same time as he did from Harvard Law School. This friend accepted a position with a well-known Wall Street firm. The classmate married the summer before he began at the firm. When he later reported to work, his employer told the new lawyer that he should have consulted the firm before getting married. However, they said, "Since he was married, it would be advisable for him and his wife to refrain from having any children for at least two or three years. Furthermore, for the sake of his advancement in the firm, he should and would want to devote all of his time both in

the office and in his personal life to the service of the firm, and children might interfere with this.”⁴ The firm wanted him to have no other god than his work. And there are many people today who are making that kind of commitment to their employer. A study by the Roper Organization sometime back showed that recent MBA graduates work at least 80 hours per week.

I am certainly not knocking hard work. As Homer Simpson once said, “If you really want something in this life, you have to work for it. Then he added, “Now quiet, they’re about to announce the lottery numbers!”⁵

There is nothing wrong with hard work as long as it does not stand in the way of close relationships with other people and with God. There is a time for work and there is a time for worship.

Gordon Dahl in his book *Work, Play, and Worship in a Leisure Oriented Society* is quoted as saying that “most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship. As a result, their meanings and values are distorted. Their relationships disintegrate faster than they can keep them in repair and their lifestyles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot.”

There is more truth to that than we would like to admit. Worship is an essential part of a successful life. Regular worship produces satisfying lives. Regular worship produces healthier families. People who worship regularly live longer. If you have to choose between work and worship, choose worship.

Dr. Foster McCurley, a noted Lutheran New Testament scholar raises an interesting point in his commentary, *Wrestling With the Word*. McCurley says: “The story, of course, is the story of Jesus’ visit to Mary and Martha. And what is striking to me is that it occurs immediately after the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan is a parable about going and doing . . . And one gets . . . to wonder about whether or not one can do and do and do all the time. Where does one stop for a moment for any refreshment, and what kind of refreshment ought it be to enable us to go back for more doing?

“This is,” says Dr. McCurley, “why this story of Mary and Martha . . . is situated immediately after the story of the Good Samaritan. Here we have a person who is doing and doing and doing. Martha received Jesus into her house. She is one who, in fact, apparently had been quite accustomed to providing hospitality, and she was beginning to wear out, as we all tend to do. For one thing it was causing an awful

⁴ Quentin J. Schultze, *Communicating for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), p. 79.

⁵ http://lifeisajoke.com/simpsonspeak_html.htm.

conflict between herself and her sister. You can just hear her mumbling to herself, 'Every time someone comes to dinner here, I am spending all my time in the kitchen and she's out there just enjoying his or her company.' And so she actually goes to Jesus and says, 'Look, don't you think I deserve a little help in the kitchen? Why don't you say something to Mary and get her out there where she belongs?' And Jesus had to stop and say, 'Look, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need for only one thing. Mary has chosen the better portion, which will not be taken away from her . . .'"

Even work that is good work can get to be too much. In the midst of all these New Testament stories about doing good work comes this little reminder to us that we need to take a break on a regular basis to sit at the feet of Jesus.

That's what this time together in worship in this place today is all about. We need to work, but we also need to worship. Don't let your life get out of balance. We need work, but we also need worship. Let's remember both sisters with affection Martha, the doer and Mary, perhaps a little spoiled, but who knew that time spent in the presence of Jesus is precious time indeed.