

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 18, 2010

## **Martha and Mary**

Luke 10:38-42; Colossians 1:15-23

Well, I know it's impressive just how creative I was with this sermon title today:

“Martha and Mary”

I had to turn it in last week before I left for our Mission Trip to Mars Hill.

Martha and Mary show up today in the lectionary,

and I thought it would be interesting to consider what light this story sheds  
on the experience of a church group doing mission together.

Indeed, it sheds a great deal of light.

But if I could rename this sermon here on the spot,

and give it a title that somewhat reflects  
the experience of our mission team this past week,  
I'd lengthen it a bit and call it  
“Gravy, Grits, Group, Grime, God, and Gratitude!”

There is so much to tell about our trip, we could be here for hours...don't worry!

I have the consolation of knowing that Mission Trip Sunday is on the way  
and you'll hear much more about our experience then.

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Still, let me start by sharing a few things that will give you a sense of our experience...

1. The first thing we probably need to get straight  
is how to pronounce the name of the region where we did our work.

If you are from the Northern United States

you will probably call the area Appa-LAY-sha,  
and that's okay, even if that's not how they say it  
who actually live there.

If you are from the Southern United States,

you will probably call the area Appa-LATCH-uh,  
as in, “If you don't say it right, I'm going to throw my apple at'cha!”

Although, to be fair, Pittsburghers do have some claim on the word  
since Pittsburgh has often been called the biggest city,  
or the capital city, of Appalachia.

Take away our buildings and bridges

and the topography, with our hills, hollers, cricks, and rivers,  
is very similar.

In fact, many of the Carolinians have a version of “Yinz.”  
As with most Southern words, they just add a couple extra syllables.  
They say, “Youins” or “Youinses.”

2. One of the more profound cultural experiences of the week for our group  
was going to breakfast every day,  
and finding that they serve - every day! -  
biscuits with sausage gravy and grits,  
along with the eggs, ham, bacon, and pancakes.

For a group full of Northerners, this was a little hard to take.

For this Georgia boy, it was heaven!

That’s probably the reason why I gained weight on this trip.

Even though I easily shed about 5 pounds a day in sheer water weight,  
sweating on the worksite,

I still netted a 5 pound gain by the end of the week!

3. That’s the Gravy and the Grits.

As for the Group,

we enjoyed many other bonding experiences throughout the week.

Like Monday morning at about 6:30,

when I was sitting out on the front steps of the dorm

doing my morning devotion,

and out walks Howie,

wearing only his gym shorts with a bath towel over his shoulder.

[I wish he were here this morning - it would be so much more fun to tell this!]

He asks me if I have my cell phone to call the Resident Director of the dorm

since he and Doug Orr had gotten back from the showers

to find that they had locked themselves out of the room.

Getting no answer from the RD,

we had to opt for the last resort - climbing in the window

Picture this now:

Howie and Hoyt outside the first floor window (about so high).

Howie in his gym shorts and towel over his shoulders,

hoisting Hoyt up a brick wall to remove the screen

and then crawl through the window.

They later came up with the headline for the newspaper:

“Howie Hoists Hoyt in Mars Hill Heist.”

Well, that’s just a preview of what you’ll probably hear on Mission Trip Sunday.

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Aside from the Group experience,

there were many reasons for Gratitude on our trip.

We all believed that God was calling us to go on this trip.

Little did we know just how much we would see God's hand at work.  
We journeyed down to NC at God's beckoning,  
and we discovered that God is doing amazing things in Appalachia.  
and we grew in gratitude as we found ways to be a part of what God is up to.

We found ourselves in a similar situation to Martha and Mary in the gospel of Luke.  
Jesus had come to the house of Martha and her sister Mary,  
and they each found a way - their own way - to respond to his presence,  
and to become a part of what he was up to.

Mary's way was to sit at Jesus' feet,  
soaking in his every word,  
basking in his powerful presence.

Martha's way was to get busy with the work at hand,  
the work of hospitality,  
providing for the physical needs of Jesus and his friends.

Now if we think of spirituality, or religion,  
as what we do to respond to the presence of Christ in our lives,  
then what we have here are two different kinds of spirituality:  
the more contemplative spirituality of Mary,  
and the more active spirituality of Martha.

However, somewhere along the way, something goes wrong with Martha's response.  
She grows resentful of her sister Mary.  
Instead of focusing on what she, Martha, is able to do for Jesus,  
she begins to focus on what Mary is NOT doing.  
She complains, and Jesus calls her to account for her loss of perspective,  
her loss of gratitude.

Now some have misunderstood Jesus here,  
as if he is somehow dismissing Martha's active spirituality.  
That would be silly,  
since Jesus often enjoys Martha's hospitality in the gospel,  
and since Jesus and his disciples clearly rely on her hospitality -  
they need her active service  
to be able to continue doing the work of the gospel.

To suggest that Jesus would dismiss the value of hard work  
that meets real, physical, earthly needs,  
would be to ignore at least a third, if not fully half, of Jesus' ministry.  
Jesus spends a great deal of time and energy  
feeding people  
healing them of their physical ailments,  
and providing for a fuller and healthier earthly and physical life.

Still, Jesus calls Martha to account for something...  
*Martha, Martha...* he calls her name twice,

as if he is calling her to a renewed self-awareness,  
in the midst of her task.

*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.*

Let's get this straight: there is nothing wrong with the work Martha is doing,  
in fact there is everything good about it.

But she has lost sight of the *purpose* of her work and of her life.

Furthermore, are we to assume from this story  
that Mary never engages in hospitable activity?

Are we to assume that she always only sits around  
in contemplation of the words of Jesus?

Martha's frustration could have arisen from her expectation that Mary would help,  
as she would normally have done.

But Mary takes a Sabbath to receive the nourishment she needs,  
so Martha grows resentful.

Truly, Jesus loves Martha as much as he loves Mary.

His attempt to get her attention, "Martha, Martha,"  
is not an occasion of belittling disrespect,  
but of heartfelt desire for her well-being.

He wants her to be free from a compulsive sense of obligation.

He wants her to serve in a spirit of joy and gratitude, or not to serve at all.

Jesus calls Martha back to a sense of awe about her purpose.

He calls her back to the *one thing she needs* to give her life meaning:  
his presence.

He reminds her of why she's doing everything she's doing:  
because God has arrived in her home  
and God is at work doing great things.

The Father is up to something amazing in the presence of the Son.

And she, Martha, has a part to play in God's grand plan for the fullness of time.

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Much of the work we did in North Carolina  
was of this physically demanding, earthy nature.

We did a lot of Martha work:

we responded to Christ's presence with an active spirituality;  
we participated in God's plan by finding work that would suit God's purpose.

Much of what we did involved getting down and dirty.

Our work was to dig deep into the grime of human existence,  
and to clean up the layers of dirt that cover over our human lives  
and hide the human beauty beneath it.

On many of our sites,  
we encountered the full, physical incarnation of despair.  
You've heard of the smell of fear?  
We encountered what could only be described as the smell of despair.

I worked at the home of Debra Rice,  
a 50-year-old woman who lived alone in her family home.  
We had projects inside and outside,  
but the biggest job was cleaning up the inside  
which had fallen into disrepair as Debbie fell into deeper and deeper depression.  
Let's just say, her many dogs, who had become her only family,  
had been given free reign in the house - you can imagine...  
...actually, no...you can't imagine - you had to see it, and smell it.

On Tuesday while at Debbie's,  
one of the neighbors from up the road came down and called Debbie over  
to tell her that one of Debbie's relatives had taken her own life:  
a 38-year-old mother of a 2-month-old baby girl.

Debbie was visibly shocked and shaken.  
After the neighbor left,  
she told me and a couple of others she wanted to show us something.  
She went inside and came back out with a letter she had written the night before.  
The note contained her funeral instructions,  
and a few final words describing what she loved about life.  
The handwriting was some of the neatest, most beautiful cursive I have ever seen.  
She said she had no idea her cousin just up the road  
was thinking the same thing she had been thinking:  
only her cousin had gone through with it.

You see, Debbie had made 58 out of 60 payments on her car loan.  
But she had gotten behind, trying to balance her loan payments with things like  
propane heat in the winter,  
and the electricity which she needs to operate the pump to her well,  
and, of course, food - and unfortunately, food for her many dogs.  
The collection agent for Chrysler Financial - just doing her own job -  
was not sympathetic, and could offer no help.  
Debbie was convinced her car would be repossessed  
and that she would have no way of getting to her job  
at the Ingle's grocery store, 20 miles away in Asheville.  
Monday afternoon she had driven to town and visited three loan agencies  
where she had tried to apply for a high-interest loan  
to pay off Chrysler Financial.  
Even the loan sharks had turned her down.  
She thought she was done for - and was planning to end her life,  
but couldn't bring herself to do it.

Having heard about her car loan on Monday,  
we had arrived on Tuesday morning and told Debbie  
that we would be able to pay those last two payments  
from some discretionary funds given by each of the churches (including GPC).  
We made a credit card payment by phone of \$760.  
Debbie now fully owns her vehicle that will get her to work  
and keep her head above the economic water.

Do you understand what I'm saying?  
You gave money to GPC, that we gave to the Mars Hill Mission Fund,  
that paid off Debra Rice's car loan, and - literally - saved her life.  
She thanked us profusely. All week, she kept thanking us.  
And she wanted me to thank you.

I told her, "Debbie, it's not our money really. It's the Lord's money.  
We just have the wonderfully joyous job of giving it away.  
You see, God has given us everything we have,  
and has washed away the grime from our own lives,  
and we have the joyous privilege of sharing our gratitude  
by sharing God's grace."

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There is so much more to tell, but here's the take home message for you:  
Like Martha and Mary, we are the recipients of an amazing gift.  
Jesus has shown up at our house.  
The risen and living Christ has arrived in our lives.  
How will we respond?  
Will we listen to him? Will we soak up his words?  
Will we get busy doing his work?  
Will we find a way to do our part of the great work he is doing?  
He wants us to be a part of his great plan for the salvation of the world.

Or will we allow ourselves to be *worried and distracted by many things?*

Have you lost your sense of awe about this truth?  
The risen and living Christ has arrived at your home, in your life,  
and is up to something amazing!  
*Through Christ,*  
*God is reconciling all things to himself,*  
*things in heaven and on earth*  
things of Mary and things of Martha.

How will you respond to this incredible good news?