“LOVING BY LISTENING”  

One day an old man was casually walking along a country lane with his dog and his mule. Suddenly a speeding pick-up truck careened around a corner, knocking the man, his mule, and his dog into the ditch.

The old man decided to sue the driver of the truck, seeking to recoup the cost of the damages. While the old man was on the stand, the counsel for the defense cross-examined the man by asking a simple question: “I want you to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the following question: Did you or did you not say at the time of the accident that you were ‘perfectly fine’ at the time of the accident?”

“Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road and…” The defense attorney appealed to the judge. “Your honor,” he said, “the man is not answering the question. Would you please insist that he answer the question?” The judge said, “Well, he obviously wants to tell us something. Let him speak.”

So the man said, “Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road and this truck came around the corner far too fast, knocked us into the ditch. The driver stopped, got out of his truck, saw my dog was badly injured, went back to his truck, got his rifle, and he shot it. Then he saw that my mule had broken his leg so he shot it. Then he said, ‘How are you?’ And I said, ‘I’m perfectly fine.’”

In order to understand someone, a friend, spouse, Christian, non-Christian—we need to listen carefully to what they have to say. Otherwise, we could be missing something really important!

Last week we had the parable of the Good Samaritan where he sees, goes, bandages, lifts, gives, pays, promises and the admonition was to “go and
do.” But we focused on being the Christ in our midst—to Be and then to do. This week we meet a woman who is doing and doing and doing—and all to exercise the virtue of showing hospitality. But this time, doing doesn’t seem to be the key. “Stop and listen” seems to be the right answer. So—what happened?

Jesus, and perhaps some of his disciples with him, have come to visit Martha and Mary. Martha rolls up her sleeves and goes to work preparing the dinner. She’s gone to the market, purchased fruits and vegetables, and had a nice lamb butchered. She’s cleaned the house, shaken out the rugs, chopped the vegetables, set the bread out to rise, made the salad, and changed her mind three times about which dishes to use. One set is too formal, but the everyday plates seem too plain. She’s put the soup on the fire, but isn’t sure the seasoning is quite right. She’s called Mary in to give it a taste, but so far Mary shows little interest in helping. She knows the lamb could get tough if she puts it in the oven too soon, and she doesn’t want to over-bake the bread. Perhaps it was a mistake to try a new recipe on such an important guest, but since Mary wouldn’t help her decide on the menu, she decided to try it and hope for the best. Should she have gone to the trouble of making seat assignments? Maybe the place cards are a little much, but she wants it to be perfect. Maybe she should switch Mary’s place to farther down the table, since it seems she’s already spending so much time with Jesus.

Martha pokes her head into the living room, hoping to get Mary’s attention, but Mary’s still just sitting and listening to Jesus. Martha goes back to stir the soup, which has started to simmer. So has Martha.

This story can really irk us. And it seems so natural for the story to turn into an exercise in choosing between the two sisters. Whom do we choose, Mary or Martha? Which of the sisters are we most like? Who is more important? More
faithful? More valuable? It is so tempting to launch into an enthusiastic defense of Martha, especially with all of us Marthas sitting in the pews. Where would we be as the church without the Marthas, those who act and give and plan and budget and do and shop and cook and make bag lunches and organize and throw bake sales and scrape the wax out of the brass candlesticks and unjam the copier and set up the coffee and cut the coffeecake and make the name tags and stuff the folders? All so that the rest of us can be like Mary and listen at the feet of Jesus, and when the workshop or worship is over, we can go enjoy a nutritious meal that, in case we haven’t noticed, someone else has prepared. Our common life in the church, our family of faith, is dependent on the activity of many!

Martha wants help. Is that so wrong? “Lord,” she asks, “do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

We might wish that Jesus had said, “You are absolutely right, Martha. Let’s just all come into the kitchen and help with the dishes. Let’s visit while we put the plates away. Many hands make light work!” But he doesn’t. Instead he says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.” She is described in the translation in the Revised Standard Version as ‘distracted by many tasks.” More literally, it would be “she is with much serving”, even more literally, much “deaconing.” Jesus says, “You are worried and distracted about many things. There is need of only one thing.”

We know. We understand. Martha is not just busy. She is not just multi-tasking. She is not just overbooked, overscheduled, and overwhelmed. She is distracted by much serving. Distracted. Distracted by too much. There is need of only one thing. But some days it is so hard to remember what that one thing is.

What if the point of the story is not to further divide Martha from Mary
and Mary from Martha, not to pit the sisters against each other, not to choose either of them, but to choose Jesus? What if this is not a story about choosing between Bible study and outreach ministries, between making time for nightly devotional study and hands-on service to others? What if it’s not a story asking us to choose between being Mary and being Martha, but of keeping our focus on Jesus, choosing Jesus, choosing just one thing he’s asking of us, or offering to us, just now?

But what is the one thing?

Just before he visits Mary and Martha, in the tenth chapter of Luke, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan as an answer to the lawyer who wants to test Jesus. “Teacher” he says, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And Jesus asks him, “What is written in the law?”

In Luke’s gospel it’s the lawyer, not Jesus as in Matthew and Mark, who gives this summary of the law, this all-encompassing picture of whom and how to love. The lawyer answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and Your neighbor as yourself.”

And Jesus says to him, A-plus. “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” “Do this,” Jesus says as if it’s a simple thing—a whole slew of words that mean all encompassing devotion and commitment—all boiled down to one little word: “this.”

But Jesus himself seems to play fast and loose with the math we he answers the question in Matthew, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” “This One,” says Jesus. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with All your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first command-
ment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” What’s the one thing? This-and this.

Do this one thing: loving the Lord your God completely and your neighbor as yourself. The story of the Good Samaritan shows how one loves one’s neighbor with actions of compassion and mercy, going and doing. Then Jesus goes to visit Mary and Martha and we see Mary loving God without distraction, without worry, resting, and listening. Do this one thing: choose Jesus through compassionate action, through single-hearted, focused listening. In this one thing—going and doing and stopping and listening—you will choose Jesus, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Wait, we say. That’s more than one! How will I know which one really? How will I know when it’s time to do and when to sit? When to listen and when to act? When will I meet Jesus in serving the wounded stranger and when in quiet contemplation and prayer?

Do this and you will live. Jesus doesn’t spell it all out, doesn’t give us all the details. But listen one more time to how he helps Martha, or tries to.

Community is important in this story. In the story of Mary and Martha, Martha does the right thing. She invites Jesus into her home. But she doesn’t spend time with Jesus, or with Mary. And at least in this narrative of the story as we have it, rather than speak with Mary directly and ask Mary directly for help, Martha does what we are all warned against for the well-being of community. She triangulates. “Jesus, make Mary help me.” It’s a divisive move.

In asking Martha to choose the one needful thing, Jesus invites Martha back into community. He does not command. He does not shame. He invites. He gives a choice. Come into the living room, he says. I want to be with you.
Will you choose me? In choosing me, you will also gain back your sister. In choosing me, you may see your way clear to loving yourself, as well as your neighbor.

In her frantic rush, in her distraction by much serving, Martha is showing neither love to Jesus nor love to herself.

Put down the lamb shank, Martha, and come join us by the fire. There is nothing you need to do to earn God’s love, or impress God, or prove anything to God. Nothing. There is nothing you can do or not do to make God love you any less or any more that God already does. Jesus looks upon you with compassion. What if you see yourself with the same love Jesus has for you?

Do this, and you will live.

When we returned from the Wind River Indian Reservation trip, we shared some of the experiences we had during that week. As I was preparing this message and thinking about service and listening, I remembered Judy Wilson’s description of how she and Kate Russell approached Grandma Billie that day. She is the 82 year-old Shoshone woman with macular degeneration and legally blind they were helping that day.

Judy wrote: “Kate was the first to offer help wherever she was needed. That was cleaning the windows in the cabinet behind the couch. When she turned to me I asked what I could do to help her. She hesitated, looked toward her kitchen, next to the table there were canned goods strewn all over a four shelf rack and other boxes of other canned goods and single cans all over the floor in front of the shelves.” They went on the clean the windows in the china cabinet, organize Grandma Billie’s canned goods and pantry, scrub the kitchen floor, and still had the time to listen to her stories about when she and her husband built the house 57 years ago and their lives together. But it began with building that respect
and one way to do that was with the listening first and then the action. The guys also listened when they hung the exterior door for her and then heard her wishes for a screen door, too. She had never had one on that house and when they made that happen she was thrilled with everything we were able to do for her!

Billie also told Judy that the government kept “sending me things I don’t like, fish, milk, and canned carrots.” This was canned evaporated skim milk that she didn’t care to use. She ended up donating this to other families with small children at the Indian Mission Church. Then when Meals on Wheels came with a rather disappointing lunch, Grandma Billie offered it to Judy to have for lunch as she would not be eating it. Judy was listening---and offered to share her lunch with Billie and they both enjoyed a delicious ham sandwich together.

Kate and Judy choose the one needful thing that day—they choose Jesus and in serving him, they were serving and loving their neighbor as themselves and all of their lives were enriched and blessed by that time together.

Have you heard this quote by Dorothy Sarnoff? She said, “Make sure you have finished speaking before your audience has finished listening.” So I’m thinking I should wind this up with a prayer. May we choose Jesus, through compassionate action, through single-hearted, focused listening and may that bring us always, closer to Him in love and service. Amen.