

Jon Hauerwas – July 17, 2016 – “Intervention Wanted”
John 10:11-16, 27-30 and Luke 10:38-42

Last week, we spoke about the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man came and asked Jesus a question: “What must I do in order to inherit eternal life?” The answer was a recitation of the two greatest commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your mind, all of your soul, and all of your strength, and your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all of the law and the prophets.”

Next, and to illustrate these commandments, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten and left for dead. Along comes a Samaritan, an unexpected hero, who goes out of his way to put the wounded man on his own donkey, and take him to an inn, and pay for his care. In essence, Jesus taught us what it means to love neighbor as self. We are to go and do. It is an active calling.

And, today, we are instructed regarding what it means to love God. Here, we are introduced to two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha is the host and she is busy preparing her home for Jesus, the honored guest. Martha, who can barely imagine what it looks like to stop and take a break is dutifully ticking the boxes on her to do

list. She is the keeper of cultural expectations – the one who would likely scoff at any modern notions of self-care.

And then there is her sister, Mary, who is doing all sorts of things that women simply didn't do. Here she is presented as a rebel, sitting at the foot of a man who was not her husband, listening to his teachings while her sister works away. Mary seems either unable or unwilling to pick up on all of the subtle cues that have likely come her way. The sound of the broom swishing back and forth. The quickened pace of her sister's feet as she tidied the various spaces of the home. Her intermittent huffs of exhaustion. And finally, the collection of a clean rag to wipe the sweat off of her brow.

Finally, Martha has had enough. Granted, I imagine that there is quite a back story here. Surely, this was not the first time that these two sisters had failed to see eye to eye. But, that day, Martha confronts the situation head on. She tosses the sweat-stained rag to the side. She walks right up to her sister, Mary. She interrupts Jesus, their guest, and she puts all of her familial and cultural expectations on the table.

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” For Martha, this is a matter of fairness and responsibility. And, in each of these ways, I’m right there with her. Standing with Martha, the one who really seems to understand the value of hard work.

In the Hebrew Bible, God often summoned the attention of the prophets by saying their names twice before saying “be still and know that I am God.” Here, Jesus employs a similar tactic. “Martha, Martha,” he says, “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need for only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” I imagine here that Martha is crushed. She turns away exhausted, bitter, and rebuked. For her, this has been a memorable day for all of the wrong reasons.

And in the aftermath of this exchange, we are left to ask why Jesus took sides with Mary. So what do you think? Do Jesus’ words of rebuke lead any of us toward a bit of soul searching about our own values and mantras? And why is it, do you suppose, that Mary chose the better part?

When I was a child, there were two lessons that I remember my parents teaching me over and over again. One was education, education, education. And the

other was work hard, work hard, work hard. Both of my parents were professional people who worked long hours and usually came home tired. Yet, despite the demands of their professional lives, it was rare to find them sitting at the end of the day.

From time to time, my mom would read. Books have always been one of her great loves. But, I imagine that she viewed them as a luxury and that she probably felt more than a twinge of guilt that she wasn't doing more around the house. Of the two of them, my dad was more interested in t.v. But, he watched only in short bursts, since they both loved to garden, and the home was exceptionally clean. It's interesting, isn't it, the messages we receive at home? The values we internalize. The mantras that we keep and pass on for yet another generation.

And I have to admit that in my own life, Jesus' call to merely sit in God's presence and be still and know that God is there is a terribly, terribly challenging idea. Because I want to be busy. I want to get things done. And I quickly become impatient when silence settles and then cries out to be heard. Perhaps, this is why parenting can often be so frustrating for me. I want to cut the grass, or paint, or pull weeds, but the baby needs a bottle, or a new diaper, or wants to be held. How difficult it is for me to sit and be still when there are so many other things to do. In my clearer

moments, I am reminded that this is the better part – caring for this child who needs my attention, and love and support.

What, then, is the right balance between being and doing? I once read an article in the *Christian Century* about the ongoing tension in Christian faith between contemplation and activism. In the article, one scholar compares the two with breathing in and breathing out. Both are essential, he writes. We can't live without spiritual formation, or breathing in; and neither can we live without Christian mission in the world, or breathing out.

To me, this all sounds like the Great Commandment restated once again. Mary, seated at Jesus' feet, attuned to her own spiritual formation, was breathing in. All the while, Martha was on a mission. A common mission to be sure. But, one that clouded her mind with the distractions of life and which led her away from all that could restore her soul.

The result is obvious. Burnout. Resentment. Bitterness. And anger. None of us can give forever. That much is certain. And if we could, then we would finally have no need for a Savior. So, in our context, perhaps the message is this: If you are feeling depleted, then don't start planning your next trip to Hawaii just yet. What

you may really need is some quiet time with God, instead. A time to replenish your soul. A time to drinking deeply from the well. A time to simply be more than you will do. In the end, it's not about social conventions and cultural expectations, the twin burdens of busyness and distraction. No. It's about taking the time to see God clearly no matter how inconvenient the timing or the venue might be.

Martha was looking for an intervention. "Jesus, correct my sister and tell her to help me out." But, what Jesus offered was a very different and much more disturbing kind of intervention. Worry less. Pray more. Yes. Hard work is good. It's like breathing out. But, make sure that you have breathed in first. It's good for the body and it's good for the soul. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.