

“NOT CHURCH AS USUAL: III – START WITH THE STORY!”

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Christian Education Sunday

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Luke 10:38-42

How many of you here have seen or at least remember a movie called “City Slickers?” It was a great movie from many years ago that starred Billy Crystal and Jack Palance, among others. It was about three nearing-middle-age yuppie guys – Crystal and two friends – who decided one year that they needed to get away and have an adventure. They needed to escape the rat race for a while, and so the three of them signed up to take part in a cattle drive.

And so they hopped on a plane, flew out west, and arrived at the ranch to join up with their fellow cattle drivers, and off they went. They went under the watchful eye of a crusty old cowboy who went by the name of Curly. Curly was played by Jack Palance.

Well, as you might imagine in a movie, there were lots of adventures and misadventures on this trip. At one point in the movie, Curly and Mitch (Crystal’s character) were out riding alone, and Mitch struck up a conversation with Curly (which was unusual, by the way – Curly wasn’t what you would call the warm and fuzzy type). At any rate, Mitch says to Curly, “Your life makes sense to you,” to which Curly responds, “You city folk. You worry a lot. How old are you? 38?”

“39,” Mitch says.

“You all come up here about the same age,” Curly continues. “You spend fifty weeks getting knots in your rope and you think two weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it.” He paused for a moment and then he went on, asking Mitch, “You know what the secret of life is?” “No, what?”

Curly holds up his index finger and says, “One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and everything else don’t mean nothing.”

“That’s great,” says Mitch, “but what’s the one thing?”

Curly stared at him and said, “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

Go back a couple of thousand years before that movie was made and you will find a very similar conversation going on between Jesus and a woman named Martha. In her own way, Martha is trying to figure things out. She’s trying to

figure out who she is, what she is supposed to be doing, what she is expected to be and do – well, she’s just like everybody else.

On this particular day, she and her sister Mary have welcomed Jesus into their home for dinner. The scripture tells us that Martha sets about getting the dinner together – working in the kitchen, which in those days was pretty hard work – none of the modern conveniences with which we’re blessed, mind you. So Martha is getting everything ready – the food, the drink, the table – everything, and, of course, she wants to do everything well, because this meal is for the Lord himself, but it sounds like all of those things were getting the best of her, because the scripture says she was “distracted by her many tasks.”

What sent her over the edge apparently was seeing her sister sitting quietly and calmly at Jesus’ feet – doing nothing (or at least that was Martha’s interpretation). So, to put it in layman’s terms, Martha blew a gasket, went right to Jesus and called out her sister – threw her right under the bus. “Lord, don’t you care that Mary has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

Now, I doubt if there’s a one of us in here who doesn’t want to say to Martha, “You go girl!” Because it wasn’t fair. Martha was working herself to death, while Mary was sitting there not moving a muscle. I mean, we get it! We’ve been there. We’ve had those big family meals where we’re running around trying to get everything done and done well and on time, and then we glance into the living room and see others sitting on their duffs doing nothing! Right?

So we don’t blame Martha a bit. But you see, the difference between Jesus and us in this circumstance, was that Jesus saw beyond the surface. He knew the problem was deeper than what it appeared on the surface. The real problem was not that one sister was working, while the other was not. The real problem was that Martha’s life was out of balance – and Jesus saw that clearly.

She was so caught up in doing, doing, doing that she had forgotten how important it was to simply be – be in the presence of God. As one writer put it so well, “If all our activities leave us with no time to be still in the Lord’s presence and hear God’s Word, we are likely to end up anxious and troubled. We are likely to end up with a kind of service that is devoid of love and joy and is resentful of others.”

She goes on to say: “Both listening and doing, receiving God’s Word and serving others, are vital to the Christian life, just as inhaling and exhaling are to breathing. Yet how often do we forget to breathe in deeply? Trying to serve without being nourished by God’s Word is like expecting good fruit to grow from a tree that has been uprooted.” (On-line, Elizabeth Johnson, Commentary on Luke 10:38-42, Working Preacher)

You see, that's what Jesus was trying to get Martha to understand – not that what she was doing was wrong, but that she'd forgotten the other part of the equation, the simply being in the presence of God, getting nourishment for her journey, and strength for her work. That was what he was telling her was “the better part,” what her sister was doing.

Once she sat down and experienced the better part, Jesus knew that she might find more balance in her life, and at the very least, remember the reason she was serving in the first place. “Starting with the story” (as I titled the sermon), starting with the story of Jesus and his love, and his call on lives, would help Martha find balance, and would help her remember why she was doing what she was doing in the first place.

Tom Long put it this way: “If you don't have some vision of what God is doing, it finally beats you down. Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his Word, listens to that vision, and without that word, we cannot go on, like Martha, preparing meals of hospitality for the world. It will finally worry us, distract us, anger us, exhaust us, and beat us down. With that Word, though, we can prepare meals for the hungry, care tenderly for the sick, show hospitality to the stranger and keep on loving and living in the name of Christ.” (On-line, Thomas Long, “Mary and Martha,” 11/22/2007, day1.org)

Now, I know enough about all of you and myself, to know that there are a lot of “Martha's” in the room. You try hard to keep all the plates spinning, to do the best you can at everything you do. Too many of you fall into bed exhausted after long, long days and wake up to face yet another long, long day. There's too much to do and not enough time to do it, and sadly, you worry about what other people will think of you if you don't get everything done. You put pressure on yourself. Am I hitting close to home for some of you?

Well, let me ask you what I think Jesus would ask all of us who find ourselves in that place. “Are you staying in the story? When do you sit with me? When do you find rest for your soul with me?”

How would you answer him?

Oh friends, it is so very easy to let life get out of balance – to do, and do, and do and forget that we are called to take time in life to simply be – be with God, be with ourselves, simply be. We tend to not do it, because we don't think we have the time, but Jesus would, I think, want us to ask ourselves, “at what cost? You're hurting yourself.”

So, I thought Christian Education Sunday would be the perfect day for this sermon, because on this day we're reminded of all the ways we in the church have to simply be, to start with the story and stay in the story. There's worship, of course,

and you're here, so that's good. But there's also Sunday School, for people of all ages, and a pretty good and varied array of classes for adults. In those classes, you can delve into God's Word and see what it meant for the day it was written and what it means for your life in these days. You can look at life through the eyes of faith, surrounded by friends who are doing the same thing. You will find support for your journey as well. Sunday School is a way to "sit at the feet of Jesus" and find balance.

Young people can find that in youth group as well. If you think we as adults have pressure on us, you can't imagine the kind of pressure young people feel, all the ways the world entices them to not be the kind of people God wants them to be, and not live a balanced life.

There are men's groups and women's groups in the church where you can "stay in the story." Men's monthly breakfasts and their yearly retreats. Women's UMW circles, and the women's yearly retreat. All ways to step off the merry-go-round of your life and sit at the feet of Jesus.

If you want to take a bigger step off of the merry-go-round, maybe the Walk to Emmaus might be something you want to do. To go away for a weekend and immerse yourself in the love of Christ and the support of fellow disciples.

There are so many other ways to stay in the story around here – a lot of small groups, the choirs, the weekly communion service on Wednesday nights - so many. The thing is, you've got to make that choice. Martha had to make a choice after Jesus invited her to sit down, and so do we.

We have to choose to stay connected to him, to stay with the story, to stay in the Word, to simply be in order that we might better do what God calls us to do, do what fills the rest of our days. But I will guarantee you, if you do as Jesus asks, if you take time to sit with him, everything else you do will be better, you'll find some balance, and you'll do what you do for the right reasons.

So let me finish by telling you about someone who came to understand that in a profound way. Her name is Shauna Niequist. Shauna is an accomplished writer and public speaker. She happens to be the daughter of Bill Hybels, the pastor of one of the largest churches in North America, Willow Creek Church. (Being his daughter brings a lot of pressure on her in itself.) She's also a wife and a mother of two small boys.

A few years ago, Shauna had it all. Everything in her life was cooking on all burners. Like I said, she has a husband, two sons, a beautiful home, parents who adore her, a really successful career, and an adoring public who buys her books and comes to hear her speak. She had it all, from all outward appearances.

But inside, she was coming apart at the seams. She writes, “In many ways, I loved this life – loved my husband, adored my kids, was so thankful to be a writer. But it’s like I was pulling a little red wagon, and as I pulled it along, I filled it so full that I could hardly keep pulling. That red wagon was my life, and the weight of pulling it was destroying me. I was aware that I was missing the very things I so badly longed for: connection, meaning, peace. But there was something that kept driving me forward – a set of beliefs and instincts that kept me pushing, pushing, pushing even as I was longing to rest.

My health was suffering. I was frequently sick. I slept poorly and not enough. I got migraines and then vertigo. The muscles in my neck and shoulders felt more like rock than tissue, and the circles under my eyes looked like bruises. My heart – the heart I used to offer so freely, the heart I used to wear proudly on my sleeve – had retreated deep inside my chest, wounded and seeking protection. My ability to taste and connect and feel deeply had been badly compromised. My faith was stilted – it had become over time yet another way to try and fail, rather than a respite or healing relationship.

I loved my life, but I had become someone I didn’t want to be around. I had become someone I didn’t want to be. (Shauna Niequist, *Present Over Perfect*, p.16-17)

When she was at her lowest, a friend helped Shauna go back to the story, go back to sitting at the feet of Jesus. And so, she began a journey where she let things go, and let Jesus in, and as she did, slowly but surely, she remade her life in a balanced way, a way in which she has now found joy, and happiness again. But it all started by sitting with Jesus, and staying in the story.

Friends, if you are where she was, or Mitch was in “City Slickers” or where Martha was in today’s Gospel lesson, if you feel like you’re pulling that little red wagon that’s so full you can’t pull it anymore, won’t you hear Jesus’ words to Martha as words to you as well this day? Step off of the merry-go-round and sit at his feet. Simply be with him. Let him help you put balance back into your life. Let him help you remember what’s really important.

There are so many people here in this place who would love to help you do that, who will journey with you, who will sit with Jesus right next to you. All you have to do is ask, or walk through the door into a Sunday School class, or circle meeting, or choir rehearsal, or any number of other places.

Friends, stay in the story, sit with Jesus, because he loves you, and wants you to know life – real life, true life, balanced life, abundant life. Sit with Jesus. May it be so. Amen