

Sitting at the Feet of Jesus

How many Harry Potter readers are here this morning? In the very first Harry Potter book (and, for that matter, movie), there is a classic exchange between the three main characters, Harry, Ron, and Hermione. They are out on one of their dangerous, late night capers, when Hermione says to Harry and Ron, in a typically self-righteous voice, “Now, if you two don’t mind, I’m going to go to bed, before one of you comes up with another clever idea to get us killed, or worse, expelled.” After she leaves, an incredulous Ron says to Harry, “she needs to sort out her priorities.” Don’t we all! ☺

There is an activity I’ve used with a variety of groups called “The Priorities Activity.” Everyone gets twenty small pieces of paper, on which they are instructed to write down their five most important relationships, their five most important possessions, and their ten most important activities, interests, or passions. Then, after each of a series of tragic scenarios, they are asked to set aside “x” number of pieces of paper, until they are finally left with just three—whatever they may be. We should try that together sometime! I think we’d find it a great way to sort out our priorities!

You could say that this morning’s story from Luke is also about priorities. We can almost hear Jesus saying to Martha, “You need to sort out your priorities.”

Martha, Martha—so what do we know about Martha? She is mentioned only in the gospels of Luke and of John. Her appearances in John are the more extensive ones. There we learn that she has a sister named Mary and a brother named Lazarus. When Lazarus dies while Jesus is still on his way to see him (and hopefully heal him), Martha goes out to meet Jesus, and essentially scolds him for not arriving sooner. Really, Martha? But then she responds with one of the all-time most awesome confessions of faith in the entire Bible: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” (We can hardly be critical of her after that, right?!)

In this morning’s story from Luke, Martha complains to Jesus about Mary not helping her with the housework. To which Jesus replies, “*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.*” Well, once again, it’s hard not to take Martha’s side, right? It seems like she’s getting a bad rap! Someone has to attend to the work! Someone has to cook, and clean up afterwards! And besides, it was Martha who first “*welcomed [Jesus][him] into her home.*”

Switching back to the Gospel of John for a moment, Jesus ends up raising Lazarus from the dead, after which a celebration dinner was held. Guess who served the meal? Martha! [*There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served; John 12:2*] She was clearly a generous and hard-working host. And yet, once again it is Mary who ends up getting all the attention and cred, because she anoints Jesus’ feet with costly perfume! [*Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus, feet, and wiped them with her hair; John 12:3*] What is going on here?

Both of these stories involving Martha and Mary are lessons in priorities, lessons about what is most important. Both of them, whether we like it or not, lead us to the same conclusion. Even more important than providing food for a meal, even more important than offering

hospitality, as important as that is, is spending time with Jesus. Caring for our relationship with Jesus. Sitting at the Feet of Jesus.

What does that even mean? Some vague act of practically doing nothing (one could even say, laziness), when meanwhile there is work to be done and food to be prepared?

One of the very best things we at First Mennonite Church have going for us right now is offering hospitality. Hosting a meal. Whether it's for people outside of our church (as we do after a funeral or memorial service), or for ourselves, in a simple act of mutual fellowship. People (us included) love to eat, and we love being together! In fact, this is a very important part of being Church!

We are blessed with a number of wonderful Marthas here! (We had a whole kitchen full of them yesterday serving the meal after Dwight Schmidt's memorial service.) Thanks be to God! To be effective as a church, we have to have someone to call when there is need of a funeral meal. That is why we have a "Kitchen/Social Committee!" We have to have another team of people to call when there is need of other kinds of fellowship meals, like last Sunday's potluck after church. That's why we have a "Hospitality Committee." Are these committees and teams an important part of our overall ministry? You better believe it! And thanks be to God that we have them.

But what Jesus seems to be saying to Martha in this story, is that there is something even more important. Or to put it differently, there is something that must take higher priority. And that something is "sitting at the feet of Jesus."

Again, what does this even mean? First of all, sitting at Jesus' feet was a way of saying to him that you want to be one of his disciples, that you want that more than anything else in life. Secondly, it is a position of humility, of humbling oneself before one's Lord. (Especially a Lord who in turn humbled himself before the entire world.) Third, Luke adds that as Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet she was also listening to him [*She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying*]. Do we have the time to just sit and listen? Even when there are lots of other tasks needing doing? And do we have the time specifically to sit and listen to Jesus? Because that requires special effort. It's not like he's here, right?—at least, not literally. It's not like we can take him out for coffee. Not directly. Of course we can take others out for coffee and invite Jesus to "come along" in Spirit. But that's not the same thing. For us, to sit and listen to Jesus is to take time out of one's day, to set aside all other tasks and activities, to spend that time in prayer, or even silence, to meditate on Jesus' words as we have them in the Bible. To imbibe those words, to eat those words. To invite them to be part of you. Inside of you.

Fourth, and finally, for us to figuratively sit at Jesus' feet is not just a solo activity, something we only do when we're alone. It is also a group activity. Both are essential, and neither are optional. That is why we have the church. This church.

The church is much more than a social club. We need each other. We need each other to encourage us to take time out from our lives of otherwise busy "doing." We need each other to help us with this sometimes-difficult discipline of listening. We need each other to help us understand what we are hearing, to help us figure out the meaning of Jesus' words. And then, we need others to give us the courage to put Jesus' words into practice. To commit ourselves to following him. Are you afraid to commit yourself to following him? I am. Maybe we could—maybe it would be a little less scary—if we would do it together.

Hey, I know! Have a seat! Let's sort out our priorities together! The food can wait.
Amen.