

“The Better Part” / Luke 10:38-42 / 21 July 2013

“Martha, Martha. You worry about so many things, and there is only one thing needful. Mary has chosen the better part, and that will not be taken away from her.” What does it mean that Mary has chosen “the better part”? The better part of what, a day, an hour, the better part of a half-burned pot-roast? If Martha loves to hostess, and Mary loves to talk, then it would seem that they've both chosen wisely. I wonder if we've chosen “the better part,” or if we're settling for less than we should?

My family and I are leaving at the end of this month for a two-week vacation in Hawaii. This past Christmas, my father-in-law—a colorful figure who makes frequent guest appearances in the opening stories of my sermons—my father-in-law gave his entire family the same gift. He gave twenty-two people a certain amount of money to cover airline costs for a family trip to Hawaii. Where he got the money I do not know. I'm not going to ask, either; I know better than to peel that onion. If I find out that he got the money by doing something short-sighted and environmentally irresponsible, well, I could either refuse the gift in protest, or I could pout... And since refusing the gift seems pretty unlikely, and no one wants to spend two weeks in Hawaii with a pouter, it just seems wisest not to ask where the money came from. But I wish someone had caught the moment on film, that Christmas Day, when my father-in-law announced the Hawaii gift. Do you remember the picture on the cover of that old board game, “Clue”? Well, that was us, except in a far humbler house: this character is astonished; this one is overjoyed; this one is annoyed; this one is skeptical of the whole thing. (That would have been me.) But that was seven months ago, and the trip is indeed going to take place.

Now, if you're having a hard time imagining me dancing in a grass skirt, or trying to catch a wave, or even just sporting a Hawaiian shirt, then kindly stop imagining such things. It's true that I'm really more of an inland sort of creature. I like dark places with ferns and moss. I prefer to play in waters where the only thing that lurks unseen is carp. I'll usually choose hemlocks over coconut trees; bright sunlight gives me a headache. But I, too, have reasons for being interested in Hawaii. There are mountains on those islands, as you know, big mountains covered in dense forest. I'm looking forward to exploring the trails on those lofty heights that overlook the sea. There are volcanoes and lunar landscapes. There's a fascinating mix of cultures, there, too: Japanese, Chinese, European, Hawaiian Islanders with their traditional religions, and mythologies, and cuisine. I grew up watching *Magnum, P.I.* I have romantic images of the place, like most people. We'll be ziplining at fifty miles an hour, high above the forest canopy. We plan to ride bikes down the side of an active volcano. We'll visit Pearl Harbor. And just because members of my wife's family like getting married in exotic locations, I'll be officiating at yet another family wedding.

Now, you probably know that a trip like this can only take place if one person takes it upon herself to herd all the cats in the same direction. And thankfully, one person did just that...(my wife, Michelle). She coordinated the schedules of twenty-two different people; arranged for them all to be aboard pretty much the same airplanes; arranged for their many rental cars and their hotel accommodations; juggled all their finances and kept track of who still owed what. She made everyone's reservations for the luau, and the ziplining, and Pearl Harbor, and the mountain-biking. She planned a 14-day trip to Hawaii for all twenty-two of us, right down to the very last meal. It was an immense amount of work, and she loved it! I'm afraid for her “the better part” of the trip, the funnest part, is already over.

This is a person who did a little happy dance a few weeks ago when her 2014 calendar arrived in the mail. She loves nothing more than calendars, and clocks, day-planners, and schedules. For some people, “the better part” is the part that looks boring, or hard, or tedious to everyone else. For some people, “the better part” is exactly the part that nobody else wants to do. But someone has to be Clerk of Session. Someone has to chair the toughest committee. Someone has to get it all done. It takes Marthas to make the world go round. Nobody will enjoy much of anything unless Martha is doing her thing, and getting precious little thanks for it. And thank God for the Marthas who actually take delight in all that hard work! Why do you think Jesus is so hard on poor old Martha, who just wants to make

sure that he and his disciples have a good meal and a pleasant stay at her home?

“Martha, Martha,” Jesus says. “Martha, Martha.” Oh, I know Martha, don't you? We all know Martha-the-Worker, Martha-the-Doer, Martha-the-Perfect-Hostess, Martha-the-Type-A-Personality. She gets things done. You need a Martha on your team. Two Marthas? On the same team? Well, that's just trouble. But I've always needed a Martha around to keep my calendar and oversee my finances. Yes, this scene from the Book of Luke, though ancient, is quite familiar to us here in the suburbs today. “Lord, tell my sister to come in here and help me make dinner for you and all your friends.” As the father of two sisters, I am quite certain that today's event in Luke comes with a long backstory; it's laden with the kind of family history that we all know. In fact, I'm quite certain that before running to Jesus, Martha used to run to her mother and father with the same complaint. “Dad, tell Mary to quit daydreaming and get in here and help me file the bills according to due date and degree of urgency.” I wonder if Martha's parents said to her the curious thing that Jesus said. “Martha, Martha. You worry about so many things, when there is only one thing needful. Mary has chosen the better part, and that will not be taken away from her.” Mary has chosen the better part...

And what is the better part? I think we can find our clue in Jesus words: “Martha, Martha, you *worry* about so many things, and there is only one thing needful.” It seems to me that “the better part” is when you do the things you do, when you serve, not out of anxiety or worry—like poor, tense Martha—but you serve instead out of love, out of joy. I don't think Jesus is telling Martha that her hospitality doesn't matter, that the dirty dishes can go wash themselves. No, I think he's simply telling her, “Relax, Martha. I'm not 'Munch.' I haven't come to write an article for the *Post-Gazette* about your matzo ball soup. I've come simply for the joy of being with you. If you're going to serve me, then serve me out of love, out of joy, and not out of worry.” Well he might say the same thing to you and me: If you're going to serve me in this world, if you're going to follow me, if you're going to undertake the sometimes tedious work of being church for me, then don't do it out of anxiety, but do it out of joy, out of love.

If you've ever truly loved your job, if you've ever really loved the thing you do in life, then you know what Jesus means. I once lived in a town where the local undertaker was named Ronald MacDonald. He was quite a jokester—as you might expect from a man named after a clown. One day, after an especially sad funeral, I asked him if he never got depressed in his line of work. He looked thoughtful for a moment, hesitated, then said to me in a grave tone of voice, “I do get depressed sometimes.” He sighed, then went on. “I get depressed. But then someone dies...and everything's okay again.”

It makes all the difference in the world when you truly love the thing you do, when you do it not out of obligation, but out of joy. Christ wants us to serve his purposes in this world not in order to gain a place in heaven, not out of guilt, or worry, or duty, or sentimental attachments to our congregation. No, Christ wants us to serve him for the joy of it, for the love. That's “the better part.” The world has suffered long with religious people living out their faith from some misguided sense of duty, or worry, or fear. Faith is meant to be lived for love; it's the one thing needful.

It takes Marthas to get things done, and I for one am grateful for them! How many Marthas does it take back here in Mount Lebanon to produce a single gallon of clean water for a Haitian home? How many Marthas does it take to grow fresh produce for SHIM? How many Marthas to educate our children, maintain our building, pay our bills? Marthas make things happen. But don't you think it's possible to be a Martha out of joy, out of love? That's the very best kind of Martha?

Are you getting phone calls asking you to give your money to “Save the Children” or “The American Lung Association”? Well, give it out of love, or don't give it at all. Do you feel a little pang of guilt whenever you walk past the Salvation Army ringers and don't put anything into their pot? Give out of love, or don't give at all. Some churches occasionally get empty envelopes in the offering plate because some people are ashamed to be seen putting nothing in. Don't give out of obligation or some heroic sense of duty. No, serve Christ out of love, or don't serve him at all. Is the pastor pressuring

you to serve on a committee? Is there a new mission opportunity begging for your support? Do you have a neighbor in need? There is so much to do in this world, in this church, and it takes a lot of Marthas to keep things together. But the rule is always this: Do what you do out of love. Do it out of joy. And when some new task presents itself, ask this question: Can I take this on because of love? If the answer is yes (and if your wife allows you)—then do it. If the answer is no, then find some other task.

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