

Say Yes to a Mess

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, August 22, 2010, Luke 10:38-42

On the second of June this year, something special happened in Detroit. Armando Gallaraga, a young pitcher for the Detroit Tigers, had faced and retired 26 consecutive batters no runs, no hits, no walks, no errors. Not a single batter for the Cleveland Indians had reached first base. In baseball, they call that perfection. And all that stood between Gallaraga and a perfect game was one last hitter, shortstop Jason Donald. When Donald hit a ball to the right side, the first baseman scooped it up and threw it to Gallaraga who came from the mound to cover the bag. As the ball smacked into Gallaraga's glove, almost everyone there thought the game was over and they had just witnessed something truly rare a perfect game in the major leagues. But to the shock and dismay of the Tigers and their fans, veteran umpire Jim Joyce ruled the runner safe. There would be no perfect game after all.

If you are a baseball fan, then you surely know that the umpire missed the call. Joyce, after watching replays, admitted it. I cost that kid a perfect game, he said. There were calls from many over the following week for the commissioner of baseball to overturn the call and change the record books so that Gallaraga could get credit for a perfect game, but the commissioner decided not to intervene. The commissioner argued that mistakes by umpires, like mistakes by players and managers, are part of the game.

What do you think? Should the commissioner have reversed the call? I'm not sure what I think, but I do appreciate the fact that it is possible to become so obsessed with perfection that you lose perspective and fail to appreciate or perhaps even notice what *really* matters. That is exactly what happened to Martha in the story we heard today from Luke's gospel.

As for pitcher Gallaraga and umpire Joyce, what really matters is that Gallaraga pitched great and won the game, while Joyce had the integrity to admit he'd made a mistake. What really mattered for Martha was that she had an opportunity to listen to and learn from Jesus an opportunity she missed because she was focused instead on being the perfect hostess.

Now, to be fair to Martha, lots of people at the time maybe a majority, even would have argued that she made the right choice. The duty of a first-century Jewish woman was to cook, serve, clean and otherwise make the visitors to her home as comfortable as possible. Martha was clearly doing her duty.

And there is nothing wrong with being neat, tidy and organized, up to a point. In fact, plenty of people these days could benefit from being more like Martha, not less. It is not a virtue to be messy and disorganized.

Yet the value of doing any given thing even something that is generally positive must always be measured against the value of other things one might do with the same time, energy or other resources. This is the moral of the story in Harry Chapin's 1974 hit, *The Cat's in the Hat*. Those old enough to remember will recall that song describes a father who is always too busy to spend time with his son he's on the road, working, doing important things. Meanwhile, the child is growing up and then it is too late. Working hard is a good thing, an important thing, and someone who is able to work but never does would rightly be criticized. But working is not always the right thing. Sometimes other things are more important.

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes tells us, For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. Many actions and choices that are sometimes or even

often right are also sometimes wrong, because the time isn't right. Of course, the challenge is to learn how to tell what time it is what action is appropriate at this moment.

Much of the time, this is simply a matter of looking at the clock. Is it 10:30? Well, then it is time for the worship service to start. Is it 7:15? Well, then it is time to start driving if I want to be sure to be in Gettysburg by 8:00. Is it 4:45? Well, if the bank closes at 5:00, I'd better get going if I want to cash my check today. In those kinds of circumstances, all that is required to tell what time it is is to look at the clock. Where is the big hand and where is the little hand?

But in other circumstances, knowing what time it is requires more than a clock or a calendar. It requires sensitivity to the situation, an awareness of what is happening, and a weighing of alternatives. For instance, a gardener might wonder if it is time to harvest the tomatoes. Now, on the seed packet it says the tomatoes are supposed to ripen 75 days after transplant. According to the calendar, it has been 75 days. But the tomatoes are still pale green and hard. The calendar says it is time to harvest, but only a fool would think a calendar can tell you when to pick tomatoes. Or imagine that the instructions on a can of paint say that a person should be able to paint an eight by ten room in an hour. So the painter starts at 9:00 and by 9:50, all the walls are covered, but he looks at the clock and says, I have to keep painting for ten more minutes. It makes no sense!

Life is not always to be lived according to the clock, or according to tradition. Sometimes, life must be lived in the moment. Sometimes, in order to know what time it is, it is not sufficient to look at a watch; we must look and pay attention to what is happening around us. And that is precisely what Martha failed to do in the scripture we read today. She was so focused on being the perfect hostess that she failed to notice what a tremendous opportunity she had.

But Mary didn't miss it. Mary was Martha's sister. Mary was the one who chose to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him teach. It was a bold choice. In those days, rabbis and disciples were typically all male, and women were expected to be doing what Martha was doing while the men were discussing the meaning of the tradition. For Mary to sit down among the men and listen while there was cooking and cleaning to be done was more than a little bit shocking.

In fact, Martha's motivation for speaking up may not have been simply that she was frustrated with having to do all the work herself. It may have also been that she was embarrassed seeing her sister trying to act like one of the guys. It may be that she was worried that Mary was making a fool of herself, or bringing shame on the family. So Martha asked Jesus to tell Mary to stop listening and start helping in short, to return to her proper role, and do her womanly duty.

Jesus' response came as a surprise to Martha, and also, no doubt, to many in the original audience for Luke's gospel. Instead of telling Mary to get up and help her sister, Jesus tells Martha that she (that is, Martha) is distracted and that Mary is the one who is properly focused and has chosen the better part. Mary is the one who is paying attention to what is going on around her, and it is Mary who is able to recognize that a chance to listen to and learn from Jesus is far more important than being the perfect hostess.

It is Mary who knows what time it is. Mary knows that it is the hour of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Mary recognizes that the old has passed away, and the new has come. The time for old roles and old rules was past. New roles and new rules now made it possible for women and Gentiles and others previously considered second-class citizens to step up and

claim their place as disciples and apostles. Mary was the one aware enough to notice that that Jesus was ushering in a new era, challenging customs not grounded in the will or wisdom or grace of God, but in the sinful and self-serving customs of human beings.

Some of these customs arose out of good intentions. In fact, the custom that women were not to sit among men when a rabbi was teaching was designed to both prevent the men from being distracted by the woman and to protect the woman from lustful men who, overwhelmed by her proximity, might violate her purity. Purity, of course, is a kind of perfection. So the custom was designed to protect and produce perfection. But at what price? At the price of at least half the human race being excluded from the opportunity to learn and grow and gain wisdom. Clearly, this is a case where the price of perfection is just too high.

As Jesus said, Mary had chosen the better part. Better to violate a few taboos than to miss out on a chance to become a better disciple. Better to risk shame and dishonor than to neglect an opportunity to learn from the Master. Better to leave the dishes in the sink than to miss your chance perhaps your one and only (or last) chance to be in the presence of the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

A few weeks ago I was browsing through some used books when I spotted a title that caught my eye. The title was, *Golf is Not a Game of Perfect*, and the author's main point, according to the back cover is that many golfers fail because they try too hard to be perfect. In the process, they get uptight and it actually hurts their performance more than it helps. It's been said that rug weavers in India always intentionally include some small error in a rug, because they believe, Perfection is only for the gods. In politics, there is a saying: Don't let the perfect become the enemy of the good. Spiritual wisdom requires that we recognize when the quest for perfection begins to lead us away rather than toward God and the good.

Now some may object that Jesus said, Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. That's true. You can find it in Matthew's gospel, chapter 5. But the word translated perfect is probably more accurately translated mature. Be mature, just as your heavenly Father is mature. And as the context shows, being mature doesn't mean so much never making a mistake, but rather treating other people well. It means loving your enemies and doing good to those who hate you. It has to do with what some people call being the bigger person. That's not easy, by any means. But it certainly is something different than what we usually think about when we think about being perfect. Being perfect in this sense is about more than not making any mistakes; it is about being mature enough to admit it and seek forgiveness when you do.

Martha was trying to be the wrong kind of perfect. Mary chose the better part, that part that would lead her closer to God, that would strengthen her faith and deepen her understanding. In all the choices we face this coming week, may we have the courage of Mary and choose the better part.

Amen.