

## **“Learning and Doing”**

One of the elements in my education for which I've always been thankful is the thoroughness with which our English teachers taught us grammar. I remember, especially, my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Eidesness. She was a stickler. She didn't let us get away with much and (in sixth grade) if we could have, (believe me) I would have been the first to figure it out. I'll leave that for another sermon.

The one thing she did (I still remember) was to impress upon us the names of the various parts of speech and their proper usage, the tenses of verbs and all of those things most of us students didn't like, but which were essential if we were to handle the English language well. She insisted that we know nouns and verbs and adverbs, and prepositional phrases and clauses and conjunctions, and which part of speech modified another, and on and on it went. Ever since she taught us those things, I ain't ever made no mistakes in my grammar never!

One of things we learned is that there are (what are called) active and passive verbs. The one indicates that an object is acting and the other that the object is being acted upon. Like (for example), “I hit the ball (that's an active verb) or “The ball was hit” (that's passive). Or, “I preached a sermon” or “A sermon was preached.” There are the active and the passive “voices” to the various parts of speech.

The dictionary puts it this way, (it says), “The passive voice is the voice form of a verb which makes its grammatical subject which in thought and fact is the object of the action it denotes.” Somehow that makes a simple thing very complicated.

All of that to say that today's story is a good example of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ events, in an experience Jesus had with two of his good friends, Mary and Martha. (It's an interesting story.) In fact, it's (most commonly) assumed (in the story) that both Mary and Martha lived in the house where the story takes place, but (if you look at the way it's presented), it's not quite so clear.

It says, “Martha opened her home to Jesus,” so it's hard to know for sure whose house it was. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that while Martha was busy playing hostess, making Jesus feel at home, Mary just sat there and listened to what Jesus had to say.

Now, the story is simple and (to many of us) it's also familiar, but there are some intriguing thoughts (when we hear it) that seem to indicate there is more beneath the surface (in this story) than meets the eye. Martha, in her busy-ness becomes critical of Mary who just sits (at his feet) and listens. And Jesus, in response to all that Martha is doing, says that Mary has made the right choice.

Now, it's not too difficult to figure out the primary lesson of the story. Jesus makes it clear that nothing should stand in the way of listening to him. That's the lesson. Nothing should stand in the way of listening to him.

Our first priority should be finding ways (and time) to listen to Jesus. Your first priority should be figuring out what needs to give (or to be sacrificed) in your life to ensure that the time you spend with Jesus (in your life) is never sacrificed.

It's a simple lesson. Jesus says “It's the one thing needed.” It's the first and (most important) step we are to take. Finding time for Jesus; making time to sit and to listen to what he says. It's not hard to follow. It's a simple lesson.

It's also (a lesson) that's not hard to apply, especially in a world like ours that is so busy, constantly on the run. It happened two thousand years ago, but it's a commentary on our age. Busy, busy, running, running, all the time stressed out, often times with things that aren't that important, while that which is most important gets set aside; doing something all the time, whatever it might be, instead of taking (and making) time for reading and listening and thinking about God's word.

It happens all around us. I dare say it happens even in us, even when our intentions are good, and even when what we are doing are good things. Again, it doesn't matter. A well-balanced Christian life needs to begin with time spent at the feet of Christ.

Now, the book of James presents the other side to today's story. It's a good counter-balance to the lesson we find. James says, "Do not merely listen to the Word...do what it says" (James 1:22). He tells his readers that there's more to the Christian life than just sitting and listening to what Jesus has to say. As important as that is, it's finally worth nothing if it doesn't lead to action and to good works and to a changed life.

In other words, (in the Christian life), there are twin dangers to be avoided. The active Christian can easily become shallow and superficial, not being fed and nourished as often as is needed, while the passive Christian can (just as easily) become unproductive and (as a result) bear no fruit.

Now, to be fair to both, both Jesus and James are speaking against the extremes. (Don't miss the point.) To sit in your chair and read the Bible and pray all day might be a good way to spend the day, but if it ignores a world in need and the (many passages in Scripture) that tell us to go out and to be witnesses and to share in the struggles of (the lives) of real people, then it needs to be called into question.

In the same way, to become an activist, always doing something for Jesus, at the expense of spending time and being fed and drinking from the well of life; it's only a matter of time before the personal well runs dry and the motivation begins to fade and there's nothing left. Just like the human body. The spirit needs intake and output, eating and exercising, not just one or the other.

Now, let's stop for a moment and ask the question. (You answer for yourself.) Where do you think lies the greatest fault in the church today, among Christian people? Is it that we don't take in enough spiritual food, or that we don't go out and do enough? (Do you know where I think it lies?) In both places. (In both places.)

For most people (even in the church), there's a shortfall on both accounts...if we're honest. We're not into the Word enough, and we're not doing enough. For most people, that's where it's at...and I include myself in that assessment. If nothing else, it's an open and (honest) acknowledgement of our sin. It's the very reason Jesus had to die. Every one of us comes up short...in both places.

Now, in the story, more of the weight of Jesus' concern is with Martha. He rebukes her for her busy and (somewhat) anxious approach to life. And yet, had Mary been content (in her life) only to listen to Jesus, to know his love and to hear (and to understand) what he taught, but to never translate that listening into doing, it would have been no different for her than it was for her sister. (It can work both ways.)

You see, Jesus wasn't speaking against Martha's serving. (That's not what's going on.) Jesus wanted her (just like he wants us) to be actively using our lives in service of others. What she was doing was not wrong and what she was doing was not what Jesus rebuked. What was wrong was the attitude she carried and (what was rebuked) was the approach that followed. It says she was "worried and upset about many things."

Have you ever known anyone like that? Have you ever found yourself in Martha's shoes? What Martha was doing was fine. All she was trying to do was to be a good hostess. There's nothing wrong with that; but she was worried and troubled and upset over many things, and that was Jesus' concern.

It's an interesting story; it's filled with application. Not only do we find some spiritual truth in what's taking place, ways to apply the lessons to ourselves, but it's a story in which we can see ourselves, somewhere along that spectrum of Martha and Mary, of actively and passively taking part in life.

Just think of your own life and how it's often lived out. Those 12 or 16 or (however many) years of education (we've all had) are more on the passive side than they are the active. It's not that learning isn't an activity, but it's a time when we are more on the side of taking things in, in preparation for those years when we'll be more able to put out.

It's the same thing in sports. There are years when we're actively taking part, and there are years when we more passively watching it happen. In retirement, in contrast to your career, these active and passive roles have differing ways of playing themselves out. It's not that one is good and the other is not; they're just different. It happens to all of us, all throughout life.

But when it comes to the spiritual side of life, the ways in which our faith is learned and lived out, we need both. You receive and you give. We are loved and (therefore) we love. God has acted for us (in Jesus) on the cross. As a result, we use our lives in action (for others) because of him. It works both ways.

It's more like a cycle or a circle than it is a diving line (and a clean break) between passive and active. We need both. God gives and acts upon us. So we give and act upon others. But in our giving we receive. It's a beautiful thing when it happens. It's what God wants to happen. But it wasn't happening (with Martha) and it was with Mary, and that's what Jesus wants for us.

You see, once we're put in touch with the love of God, recognize and realize how much God has done for us, then the passive and active roles of the Christian life are set in motion. If we do one without the other, it means nothing...in either direction.

If we listen to the word of God and never do anything as a result, it's missing the point. And if we busy ourselves with all kinds of good things and never take the time we need to listen to Jesus, then it's all for naught. Either way we can fail. In both ways (together) we win.

This week, as you know, 40 representatives (from our faith community) are traveling to Mexico to build homes for people less privileged than us. They'll be working hard, spending long days in the hot sun, and (by the end of the week) will most likely be (more than ready) to return home. They'll also be spending time witnessing to their faith and being challenged in their faith, and hopefully (as a result) growing closer to Christ. The week (by design) will include elements of both an active and a passive relationship with Jesus. If this week (for those 40) is anything like what has happened in years past, they will come back different (and better) than when they left.

Now, as I think about the week ahead for us, it's no different. The circumstances are not the same. (I realize that.) The opportunities we have (right here) might not even come close. (It's a different experience.) There's no question. But the calling is no different and the active and passive challenges set before us (here in San Jose) are as real and as important as they are in Tijuana for them. Be a listener like Mary. Be a doer like Martha. But avoid the pitfalls (on either side) that can so easily suck you in.

It's not hard to follow. Put first things first in your life. The "one thing needed" is to let Jesus speak to you. In your home, when you start the day. In your private life, when it's just you and God. Here in church, when we're listening and learning together. Do it regularly. Do it often. Make it a daily part of your life. We all need to be fed with spiritual food.

And then go out and do. Whatever you do and (wherever you do it), live it out. There's a world out there that needs to hear, and (a world out there) that needs to be acted upon (by God) through us.

As I think about the events of this past week in Nice and the events of these past weeks (and months) throughout the world; I don't have all the answers. We can't change the world and make it right. But we know the One who can, and we know the One who has, and his name is Jesus, and there's a world out there in need.

In closing, don't sell your calling nor your Savior short. Sit at Jesus' feet. Keep listening. Take and make time to be passive. And then live it out. Do it. Share what you've been given. The Christian life and calling are as active as anything you will ever find. But we need both, we need to be learning and doing. We need to be both Marys and Marthas (at the same time), and we always (at all times) need Christ. Amen.