



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “THE RIGHT THING AT THE WRONG TIME”

Scripture Lessons: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Luke 10:21-42

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, July 21, 2019  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 10:21-42

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’

Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.’

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’

Leader: The Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last night my family returned home, having spent the last two weeks at Montreat, North Carolina. I often take that time as study leave, and what we do is we rent a home that is large enough for my immediate family as well as my parents and my sisters and their families, and, though we are a bit crowded, we have a wonderful time together.

Most evenings we would gather for a meal, and we would talk about the day. Martha Ann might talk about a long walk she took to the Graybeard trailhead. The kids would generally talk about something that happened at clubs. My mom and dad might talk about an excursion they took into Black Mountain. Every one of our first meals we found ourselves reflecting upon another occasion when we had gathered as a family – it was, for us, the now infamous Thanksgiving of 2011.

I knew something was wrong when Martha Ann got sick even before we arrived at my parent's home in Columbia, South Carolina. In no time at all, other family members began to succumb to the stomach virus. When it was all said and done, seven adults and several of the children were down for the count, and some of them were out of commission for the entire week.

I'm serious when I say that it was like something out of one of those deadly virus movies. Most of the infirmed remained in their rooms while those of us who were still among the functionally living tried to maintain the various triage units as best we could. Sadly, our time together came and went, with hardly a passing thought as to sharing a Thanksgiving meal together.

As we sat around the table in Montreat thinking back on the events of that week we laughed — we can laugh about it now! And we all agreed that what made that particular Thanksgiving especially problematic is that we lost, both literally and figuratively, our "Martha's"...those very important people who keep the household functioning at a high level. And trust me when I say that you can lose a Holton relatively early on and things will be just fine. You could even lose my dad and several of the children, but if you lose a "Martha Ann" or another of the key members of our family, those other proverbial "Martha's"...well, let's just say that things don't run nearly as efficiently!

Now such a stereotypical reference to the dutiful Martha's of the world can be traced right back to this morning's New Testament lesson. To begin, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home, which, we would do well to know, was very unusual in that day and age. What's more, Luke clearly has no trouble identifying women as some of the faithful followers of Jesus.

In this story, Mary and Martha are privileged to have Jesus visit their home. And Martha, she is clearly busy being a good hostess...there were "many tasks" the Bible says. Mary, on the other

hand, Martha's sister, she had made her way to the feet of Jesus and she was sitting down and listening to him. And this upsets Martha so much that she tries to get Jesus to take her side. I imagine her peering around the corner with flour on her face and sweat on her brow and offering those words, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?"

I suppose it would be easy for us to presume that Mary is oh so good and virtuous, and that Martha has somehow forever missed the mark, but we need to be careful not to do that. This is, after all, the same Martha who at another time when her brother Lazarus had passed away, up and "went and met [Jesus], while Mary," interestingly enough, "stayed at home."

What I'm trying to say is that our Biblical Martha's eternal welfare is, by no means, in jeopardy, nor are those of us who identify more with Martha than Mary somehow relegated to a second class kind of spiritual life. So, if not an enduring criticism of Martha, and of the business that often accompanies life, if there is in fact more going on here than meets the eye, then what is it?

Well, listen again to a verse that preceded the stories we read this morning – if we look back at Luke 10:23 this is what we read: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desire to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it." My sense is that what we may have here is a good example of another one of Jesus' earlier comments, when in verse 21 Jesus talked about those who are "wise" and "intelligent" missing what babes understand. I say that because in the story of Mary and Martha, and in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we have wise and prudent people, intelligent and faithful people, saying and doing otherwise good things, just at the wrong time.

Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. It begins with a lawyer who knows the right questions to ask, and he even knows many of the right answers, but, what he has trouble hearing was God's word for him at that particular moment in time. "Yes, love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength." "And, yes, love your neighbor as yourself." "Now, go and do something about it!"

As our Old Testament lesson reminds us, there is a time for every matter under heaven. To be clear, there is a time to declare one's love for God and neighbor, and there is a time to "go and do likewise;" there is a time to be hard at work in the kitchen, and there is a time to sit at the feet of the master.

But, tell me, when do we go and when do we sit; indeed, how do we know that we are doing the right thing at the right time? When we stop and think about it, Jesus' own life modeled this kind of spiritual discernment – that ability to prioritize his responsibilities. For example, at one time Jesus is entering the synagogue and teaching, because he knows that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; and yet, at another time, Jesus is entering people's homes and healing them, because he also knows that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.

Sometimes we see Jesus getting up while it is still very dark and making his way to the neighboring towns – keeping very busy- while at other times we find him trying to escape the crowds, to find that quiet place where he can pray and be alone – “a time for every matter under heaven.”

But what’s the right “matter,” the right subject, the right task, the right action...and when is the right time to do it? I can assure you that, pastorally speaking, when dealing with a person who is living with the consequences of a bad decision, while a word of justice might be relevant, it is a word of grace and forgiveness that most often needs to be spoken and heard; or what of that same forgiveness that we would seek from someone we love – oh, it is a good thing to do to seek it alright...but, if the cut is too fresh...if the wound is too deep; ah, there’s something to be said for timing, is there not?

So how do we avoid doing the right thing at the wrong time? That is an important question, because, like Mary, there are those times in life when we too need to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen, but there are also those times when we need to get up and do the dishes; and, like the lawyer, there are those times when we need to affirm our love for God and neighbor, but there are also those times when we need to actually demonstrate whose neighbor we are!

Sometimes I feel like Jesus is speaking to me...“Holton, Holton, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” It makes me wonder - what are those good things that have distracted us from doing the right things? What are those faithful affirmations which God would have us to enact – care and dignity and respect; what are those daily duties of life which have all but kept us from seeing Jesus in the next room?

And here again, it so much about timing, because we know that Jesus doesn’t call us to sit at his feet forever; at some point Jesus says: “Come there’s work to do.” So, which one is it? Are we supposed to “go and do likewise” or are we supposed to “sit and listen”? There is no doubt that Jesus has told us to do both...and there is, in fact, a time to do both.

It is interesting to note that when both the lawyer and Martha were finally able to discern the particular path that Jesus wanted them to take, it was when they were actually in his presence. And so, perhaps, the very best contribution that we can make to our spiritual discernment - about whether we are supposed to be going and doing or sitting and listening...is to continually draw near to God, just as God has drawn near to us.

And how do we do that? How can we be in God’s presence? Well, our reformed heritage would have us to know and believe that Jesus is present whenever we gather for worship, whenever the Word is read and proclaimed, whenever the sacraments are celebrated...these are times when, by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, the Living Word, is especially and uniquely present.

To say that God reveals himself to us in a variety of ways would be an understatement. This morning in our Daniel Plan Sunday School Class, we talked about how God is forever at work in our lives through the Scriptures, through the work of the Holy Spirit, through experiences with

God and one another, through history and tradition...ah, through all such “means of grace,” as we call them, they put in closer proximity to God’s love and God’s power.

But, friends, once we are there...we really do need to pay attention, for like the lawyer and like Martha before us, may we never be so sure of what Jesus would say to us, that we cease to listen; and may we never be so consumed with all the things we need to do, that we neglect the precious time that is afforded to us to be in the presence of our Savior.

Let us pray...

Lord, there is so much you would have us to say, so much you would have us to do. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your word, and your direction, and your wisdom, every moment of every day. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*