

Stop and Listen

Part 2 of Sermon Series:
Action Required

a sermon based on

Luke 10:38-47

and prepared for
July 21, 2019

6th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2019 Rev. Mark A Harkness.

NOTE: Due to a bulletin misprint, this sermon was not actually delivered in worship.

When I was in seminary, one of the more frequent discussions in my theology and ministry classes was about which was more important: orthodoxy or orthopraxis. Most of you, I presume have heard the word *orthodox*. Am I right? You probably have a sense of what it means, too. Will you indulge me for a moment to offer a real quick Greek vocabulary lesson, because they go to the heart of the Gospel lesson today?

Let's break it down. If you remember back in grammar school, we learned that a lot of the newer English words derive from Greek or Latin roots; words like *astronaut*. A fitting example as we recognize the fiftieth anniversary of man's first steps on the moon. *Astronaut* puts together the *astro* or star with *naut* or traveler so that we get a word that means star-traveler, even as we continue to look for that day when we travel beyond our own moon, to other planets, and eventually other stars.

So let's go back to these two words that I mentioned earlier: *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*. *Ortho* means right or straight. So combined with *dox*, we get *right thought* or *right belief*. That's important to remember. Often we think it means traditional. So what about *orthopraxis*? We have *ortho* again: right or straight; but here we add *praxis* or practice. That is right practice or right activity.

Here's the irony. In seminary, so often the discussions about which is more important – orthodoxy or orthopraxis – usually concluded that orthopraxis was more important. At times, I was convinced that that was the correct conclusion. But is it? I get it.

Which pleases God more: that I can recite the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed from memory? Or from last weeks, Gospel lesson that I love my neighbor? That is how that whole conversation started out with Jesus. The lawyer could recite the Shema – “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one. You shall love him with your whole heart, with your mind, your strength and soul,” along with the corollary to “love your neighbor as yourself.” But he was looking for a loophole. What good is it to know what God expects if you're not going to do it, if you're not going to “practice what you preach”? Right? So it would seem that orthopraxis is more important – doing the right thing.

Do we take it further? St. James asks, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?” (Jas 2:14) Taken out of context, that might sound like James is saying that faith cannot save. But that's not what he's saying. He clears it up when he says, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” (Jas 2:26) They go hand in hand.

In the Gospel lesson today, Martha was busy doing what was expected. Or so she thought. She loved Jesus. When he came to her home, she wanted everything to be just right. Let's not scold her for that. She wanted him to enjoy himself. She wanted him to feel welcomed. She was trying to do everything that the culture demanded. Mary knew that. Why wasn't she helping? Just think about how much quicker and better it would be if she would help?

Part of the irritation was that Martha was the older sister. Mary was the baby. I get it. I'm the oldest of my siblings. I remember getting scolded when the chores weren't done when my mom got home from work, even though my portion was done while my brother and sister goofed off. I'm sure there's some of that going on here, too.

But what does Jesus say, “Martha, Martha,” (he doesn't scold her but says it lovingly) “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 from her.” (Lk 10:41-42) Notice he didn't say Mary has chosen the “right” part or the “good” part, but the “better” part, implying that what Martha had chosen was “good”. But she was missing out on more.

This is a powerful passage of Scripture. That Mary, a woman, was sitting at the teacher's feet listening to him, it's just not done. What was expected was that a woman would take care of things. That's what Martha was doing and missed or almost missed. (We don't know if she put

down her work and joined them. Scripture doesn't say.) In her rush and her craving to do the right thing, did she even bother to ask Jesus what he expected?

Even Jesus stopped and to ask and listen, when two blind men called out for him, he asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mt 20:29-34) When Bartimaeus cried out to him, he asked the same question. (Mk 10:51, Lk 18:41) Why? He knew they were blind. Of course they wanted to see. But is it always that simple? In John's Gospel, when Jesus goes to the pool at Bethesda and sees the man who'd been lame for thirty years, he asked, "Do you want to be made well?" The answer seems obvious, he's at the pool where healings take place. Yet that's not his answer, he says, "No one is here to help me get into the water when it is stirred." (Jn 5:1-7) When a simple "Yes" would have been sufficient, he offers an excuse.

There are other times, Jesus asks when it's not so obvious. That's something that happens to us. Sometimes we want to do for Jesus – to for someone – without asking what they need or want. We even do it with the best of intentions.

In cases of natural disasters, a tornado or a hurricane, well-intentioned people and churches will rush to the site with clothes and supplies. And sometimes get angry when they're turned away because their good deed was rejected. I think that's how Martha was feeling when she first spoke up. But usually what happens in those cases, is that the people trying to do good haven't asked what people really need.

Often it's because we as Dr. David Jones, spending too much time on the airplane. Let me explain. What did the Wright Brothers set out to do? Build an airplane, right? Nope. The Wright Brothers tried to fly? Building an airplane is what got them there. Dr. Jones uses the example of some missionaries in Vietnam who were trying to combat malnutrition. The simple solution would be to send nutritional food and to explain how it was important. But mother's already want their children to be healthy. You don't need to convince them. But what one set of researchers did, is they looked for the healthy kids in the community, these weren't necessarily wealthier families. Then they asked those mothers what they were doing. It was simple things. Instead of feeding their kids twice a day, they fed their kids the same amount as the other families across four meals. They interspersed the meals with greens from a local plant which turned out to be packed with vitamins. That "poor people" food made a big difference. Decades later, that community has remained healthy, because those researchers asked and listened before doing.

God wants us to do the right thing. We can just happen upon it. That's where orthodoxy finds its place, knowing the right things prepares us to do the right things. Sometimes that means stopping what we're to listen, whether we're new to this thing called faith or whether we've grown up in it, as St. Paul says, "(we) see in a mirror dimly." (1 Cor 13.12) but looking for that moment when he will see the Lord face to face.

This weekend we offered Vacation Bible School to the community. We had ___ kids here, more than last year. Praise the Lord. God gives good gifts. Yee Haw. VBS has changed since I was a kid. It used to be held for a week during the day. But that didn't work for volunteers or parents. Many churches started offering evening VBS and that worked for a time. VBS is a good thing. Visiting with Martha and Mary was a good thing for Jesus. But what he really wanted was to spend time with them, what he really wanted was to tell them how much he loved them and to share himself with them. For Martha, that meant she would have to change a bit of her expectations about all the things that needed to happen.

The VBS Bible verse for the past few days, has been a derivative of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whomever believes in him might have eternal life." That's why we have VBS. The games, the food, and the music, are just the airplane – our purpose is to help each person we encounter know the right thing. That right thing, is that God

so loved you, he held nothing back.” It’s something each of us needs to hear again. You are so important to God, that he gave all that he is for your sake. The only catch with it is the same as all gifts, you just have to accept it and unwrap it and use it. We learn how to do that by taking time to stop and listen. AMEN.