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SERMON

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Faith & Works

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During Jesus' ministry, he seeks out real people who express deep emotions and crave a meaningful life. To reduce any of the individuals he encounters as less than human or merely ancient relics also diminishes the truth of the gospel for us.

Last week, we heard the story of the Good Samaritan describing a wounded man, in desperate need, and the empathy that provokes another man to care for him. The Samaritan's sense of shared humanity heals both the man in the ditch and us.

It heals us centuries later from the inhumanity that festers when we hide behind labels or perpetuate fear of those deemed "outsiders" or different from us.

Today's story brings that roadside lesson not only closer to home, but into our homes. Jesus exposes our rivalries with a story about our most intimate relations. We've heard this story many times over the last few years and may never plumb the breadth of what it teaches.

Just when I thought I knew the story of two sisters, Mary and Martha, and Jesus, a scholar's close reading of the original Greek opened this story in a new dimension.

(As an aside, that *thunk on my forehead* hints at my first lesson to suspend my righteous intellect and education, of thinking I know a word and therefore a story, from getting in the way of this nuanced gospel lesson.)

This fresh translation stretches us beyond merely aligning with either Martha or Mary or rewarding one behavior over another.

Loving God, too easily our desire to be right creates anxiety and then blinds us from seeing others...or you. Silence those voices in our head that tell us there is only one way and that others are wrong. Speak to us with your calm wisdom. Startle us with your truth. Amen.

Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at his feet and listened to what he was saying.

⁴⁰ But Martha was *distracted by her serving*, so she came to Jesus 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.”

⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are careful and *distracted by much ministry*, ⁴² but one thing is needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”

Imagine, you're driving on the highway and you see another car sort of cruise past you slowly. You notice that maybe the driver is sort of lost in thought, or they're talking to themselves, or they're singing a song, or they're arguing with the person next to them and you're just like, wow, I would just love to know where they're going, what life they're leading.

That's when it hits you. You see them by sheer coincidence, by happenstance, and yet, you feel a momentary spark and realize that share this common existence. They're going just take their exit and you're going take your exit and you're never see them again. But for that one split second, you glimpse into a world you never imagined.

The word to describe this sense of curiosity about another person is “sonder.”

John Koenig wrote *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* in 2012. In it, he coins words for a range of emotions of human experiences that had previously escaped the English language.

Koenig conceived of sonder with an ear for a pleasant sound and plausible etymology from the old French and Latin words. It could have remained in the archives of fiction.

Since publishing his book, the word “sonder” is moving to the world and entering common language. “Sonder” describes the awareness that every passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own, and that you are just an extra in their epic story, that’s taking place all around you.¹

I think we’d be remiss if we did not turn sonder towards ourselves and to serve as a mirror. Has it occurred to you that another person, whether random passerby or someone with whom you share this life, knows your “epic story”?

Just like people we meet in scripture whom we tend to reduce from multi-faceted humans into two dimensional caricatures, if we ignore the gravity of another flesh and blood human, we miss out on the fullness of humanity.

¹ Sonder – The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows

It's far easier to collapse the complexities of another person into some simplicity of a binary: intellectual vs blue-collar, liberal or conservative, resident or alien.

We much prefer to dwell in the land of certainty – the place where we are right. We tell ourselves conservatives are selfish. Or liberals are naive idealists. Blue collars cannot understand global economics. Intellectuals are ignorant of more than they could possibly understand. You know the tropes as well as I do, they sting, and they are wrong.

Rather than invest the time and vulnerability to meet someone as they are, it is far easier to label them into some tidy category. To walk through life with such certainty lessens our risk of being weighed down by them and from being startled about ourselves.

On his journey to the cross in Jerusalem, Jesus takes a break to stop into the home of sisters, Martha and Mary.

Readers of biblical stories might immediately be triggered with the long-history of sibling rivalries – Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and Rachael and Leah. Mention two women and then recall the toxic dynamics in a household such as Sarah and Hagar, or Peninnah and Hannah.

Add to this tension the improbability that Jesus enters the home of a *woman*. Rarely, in the first century would a woman be considered a householder.

The gospel writer sets the stage to upset our understanding of human life with these intimate family relationships and a woman's potential.

We meet Martha, who is distracted by serving. This word "serving" describes more than household tasks to welcome Jesus and his entourage. She engages in the holy tasks of serving to which we ordain deacons. Literally the story says Martha is "deacon-ing."

While she ministers, Mary sits in the posture of a student who is attentive to a rabbi. Another unexpected twist. At the time, women were considered inferior to receive the gift of learning.

Martha senses the amount of work and asks Jesus, "tell Mary to help". Most often, we interpret this story pits Martha against Mary and serving against learning.

We don't know if Mary always shirks getting her hands into the work of ministry. Or if these two just had a spat. Or, if their relationship soured long ago. Or, maybe because of our

own lives, we read contention into the story that is not evident.

Jesus simply calls out Martha for being distracted, as if to say, “Martha, you are distracted by your ideas of life, your perspective. Open your eyes.”

Martha is so preoccupied with her path that she misses out on seeing the epic stories.

This story is about more than ranking or comparing, it is about curiosity. Jesus claims Mary chose the “good portion” by sitting and listening, by learning his epic story.

Maybe choosing the good portion is knowing when to listen and when to serve. Sometimes the good portion leads us to serve another person with an open heart and mind so we perceive their humanity. Then, when we open the biblical story, we gain a deeper understanding.

Let’s turn that around.

Other times the good portion draws us to learn from Jesus about accepting and forgiving so that we will gladly put our hands to the holy task of feeding and clothing and loving another person we’d otherwise pass by.

Let me close with a story, a Ted Lasso story.

The TV series, *Ted Lasso*, chronicles an American football coach recruited to coach a Premier *European* Football Club. The main character, Ted Lasso, portrays the ultimate country bumpkin, with little knowledge of what we call soccer. He knows little about English traditions, and yet from a poster of humility, he teaches everyone about human character, building trust, and believing in one another.

At a quintessential English pub, Lasso faces one of his many nemeses – Rupert – the former owner of the team and former-husband of the current owner. In an attempt to humiliate Lasso, yet again, Rupert challenges him to a game of darts. Anyone raised in English pubs, learns to play this highly competitive game.

Crowds gather to watch and hear Lasso:

“Guys underestimated me my entire life. And for years, I never understood why. It used to really bother me. But then one day I was driving my little boy to school, and I saw this quote by Walt Whitman and it was painted on the wall there. It said: **‘Be curious, not judgmental.’**”

Lasso pauses and throws a dart.

“So, I get back in my car and I’m driving to work, and all of a sudden it hits me. All of them fellas that used to belittle me; not a single one of them were curious. They thought they had everything all figured out. So, they judged everything and everyone. And I realized that they’re underestimating me...who I was had nothing to do with it. Cause if they were curious, they could’ve asked questions. You know? Questions like: ‘Have you played a lot of darts, Ted’”

Just then, Lasso throws the winning dart.²

During this season of Lent, these stories from the Gospel of Luke and the stories of our lives prompt us to consider if what we accept as true actually gets in the way of being open, to one another, ourselves, and closer to God.

This Lent, add “sonder” to your vocabulary and be open to practicing it in your life.

Before putting someone into a binary, before aligning with one behavior, or one identity, become curious about the depth of their humanity and what exists far beyond your limited view.

² [Bing Videos - Ted Lasso](#)

Curiosity might lead you to do something for the person in need.

Curiosity might cause you to recall something Jesus said about welcoming the stranger.

Curiosity might allow you to let down your guard, stop your routine, let another person into your epic story.

Curiosity might open the universe one person at a time, and in such wonder, lead you to God.



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