

Show Me What Is Mine to Do

Last week we heard about that glorious moment on the mountain when Jesus shines and chats with Moses and Elijah. God declares that Jesus is his Son, his chosen one and booms one—and only one—command to the three terrified disciples: “Listen to him.” *Listen to him*. Through the rest of chapter 9, Jesus continues teaching and healing throughout Galilee, upending every conventional notion of what God’s reign is assumed to be. Toward the end of the chapter, Luke tells us that Jesus “set[s] his face to go to Jerusalem.” The shortest journey to Jerusalem goes through Samaria. If this were a movie, this would be the moment when the soundtrack turns dark and ominous. No respectable Galilean Jew wants to go through Samaria.

Samaritans trace their lineage back to ancient Israel. They, too worship one God and follow the Law of Moses. They differ from the Jews of Jesus’ day over where God is rightly worshipped. Jews look to the Temple in Jerusalem; Samaritans look to the temple on Mt. Gerizim. This difference is not simply an agree-to-disagree detail, but a deep and passionate dispute. The Jews and Samaritans of Jesus’ day loathe each other, so much so that when a Samaritan village refuses to welcome Jesus, two disciples ask him if they can rain down fire on the village. (Jesus rebukes those disciples, by the way. The whole raining-down-fire-on-enemies thing is not on Jesus’ agenda.)

After Jesus sends seventy-two followers out to the places he intends to visit on his way to Jerusalem, we reach our text for this morning. This portion of the gospel has often been read on different Sundays. In suggesting that they be read together, my initial reaction was that we are being asked to cram for a test. Scholars encourage me—and us—to see something more. [Read Luke 10: 25-42]

A few weeks ago, another preacher posted a prayer that I have prayed on repeat of late:

Dear God,

All I can think to say this morning, is please guide my attention to that which is worthy of it. When I am overwhelmed by everything that has to get fixed in this broken down world, show me what is MINE to do then please give me the strength to do it and the humility to rest afterwards.¹

Show me what is mine to do. I hear this prayer echoed in the words of the legal expert and Martha this morning. I believe they both want to be faithful. I'm convinced that they long to know what is theirs to do.

The legal expert comes to Jesus trying to justify himself, to make himself feel good and prove that he is in the right. No one doubts that this man knows his bible. When he quotes portions of Deuteronomy and Leviticus off the top of his head citing love of God and love of neighbor as the keys to a full and faithful life, Jesus commends him. Jesus tells the man that he is correct and that if he lives what he has just spoken, he will indeed enjoy a full and faithful life, eternal life even. Eternal life is of course not strictly fire insurance for the great by and by, nor is it about shielding anyone from heartache or struggle. Eternal life is life with God that extends from the here and now into life beyond death. So it sounds like the expert is on the right track, and yet he can't leave well enough alone. He asks another question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds by telling a parable about a Samaritan and a stranger who hovers near death on the side of the road. We often refer to this parable as the Good Samaritan and we have gone on to name hospitals and laws after him, which masks just how stunning this parable is. Remember, just a few verses ago, Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus because of where he is headed, and disciples wanted to obliterate them for this insult. At the end of the parable, Jesus asks the legal expert,

'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.'²

The expert seemingly cannot bring himself to utter the words "the Samaritan" out loud. It seems that he is almost too stunned to respond at all. In just a few sentences, Jesus has exploded the notion of neighbor beyond the bounds of the people in my neighborhood to include the people whose very existence makes my

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, <https://open.substack.com/pub/thecorners/p/a-prayer-for-monday-jan-20th-2025>

² Luke 10:36-37, NRSVue

blood curdle. Jesus tops it off by telling the expert to “go and do likewise.” In other words, Jesus has the gall to tell this one who has spent his life immersed in God’s word that he still has something to learn about faithfulness from someone he has detested, resented, and even feared his entire life.

Then Jesus heads on his way. A woman named Martha welcomes him into her home. As you may know, welcoming someone in Jesus’ day meant more than pouring them a glass of sweet tea and setting out some cheese straws. Hospitality customs involved preparing a meal for whoever showed up, attending to every detail to ensure that the guest felt fully, appropriately, and joyfully welcomed. It was a matter of honor. And while Martha bends over backwards to do all that is expected, her sister Mary sits at Jesus’ feet. Now it is Martha who has a question for Jesus. Luke does not explicitly tell us that Martha is trying to justify herself. I’m not sure he needs to:

‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me.’³

And Jesus takes all the wind out of her complaint by telling her that Mary has chosen the better part. Ooof. I find myself wanting to defend Martha, all the Marthas. The church would not and could not run without Marthas of every gender, Jesus. Somebody has to make the food and weed the flower beds and wash the dishes and watch the children and take out the trash and...and...and. Martha is doing exactly what she is expected to do, by the way. She is serving, deacon-ing in fact according to the Greek word here. And by the way, Jesus, you just told the expert to go and *do*. Martha is doing the doing part and you call her out on it?

Jesus recognizes that the expert and Martha are both seeking to be faithful. They want to do what is theirs to do, so they come with their lists and want Jesus to pat them on the head and declare them star students. I get it. I want to be faithful, too. *Goodness, Jesus, the world is so hard at the moment. Everything is so shaky, so angry, so ugly in so many ways. I am overmatched and overwhelmed. I have a lengthy clearcut list*

³ Luke 10:40, NRSVue

of things I'm certain I need to do, Jesus, so just pat me on the head when I do them. Or at least give me a gold star for coming up with the list at least. Is that too much to ask?

And then I realize what I have in common with the expert and with Martha. I am caught up in my own head, my own personal whirlwind. "What must I do?" the expert asks. "Tell her to help me," Martha insists. *I cannot do all the things that I am convinced are mine to do, Jesus. Let alone set the world straight on what it's supposed to do.* And then like a sudden rainstorm after months of drought, I hear that voice from last week's text: "This is my Son. Listen to him."

And when I listen, I can almost hear Jesus say, *Ellen, Ellen, take a breath. Pause from pointing out how they are getting it wrong. Stop trying to justify yourself. If you genuinely want to know what is yours to do, Ellen, listen to me. You cannot save the world. You cannot even save yourself.*

And thanks be to God I am reminded that that saving work is not mine to do. That's God's job. My job is to listen to Jesus and then to go and do what *he* tells me, not forever and ever amen, but next. As I listen and pray and study and worship alone and with others, I am convinced that God grants me some clarity about the next right thing, the next right step for me to take on the long and winding road of faith. To let go of what the larger world has decided I need to be or do. To open my eyes and learn compassion from an unlikely source. To take a breath and let go of my resentment. To cross the road I'm on and attend to the hurting one who happens to cross my path. And then to turn back and listen to Jesus again. It is not a forced choice between compassion or devotion; it is not simply about service or worship; it is all of the above and more.

Last week we asked the confirmands a question that we also ask parents presenting a child for baptism, a question we ask new members when they join, a question we are all asked every time we renew our baptismal vows: "Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his word and showing his love?" And at some point along the way, most if not all of us have answered, "I will." Perhaps more than once. If I am not simply going through the motions, if I have any hope of obeying Jesus' word, any hope of following him faithfully, I need to sit at his feet, and listen first, and listen again, and again, and again. Because this whole life-of-faith

thing is not a checklist, nor is it a fixed point. And the life of faith is based not on my agenda but Jesus'. The first step is always back to Jesus.

By the grace of God, we are called to go on a journey with Christ, a journey that comes with twists and turns and ups and downs. This ongoing holy conversation is a continual dance. And to be crystal clear, what is mine to do is rarely if ever about my opinions or my preferences or my comfort or my convenience or even my safety. Jesus tells Martha to set aside what her culture expected and even demanded of her. Jesus challenges the legal expert to cross the boundary between friend and foe and learn mercy from one he had been taught to despise.

First, last, and always, I am called to listen to Jesus, to ask all the questions I want, to listen again, and then to go and do what he asks. And then I am called to begin again, being reassured of his grace and forgiveness, confessing where I get it wrong, listening some more, and leaning on him for the courage to go and do what he asks of me next.

And so, I pray, *show me what is mine to do, Lord.* Amen.