

Don't Just Do Something...Sit There

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for August 8, 1992

Lessons for the Ninth Sunday After Pentecost - Year C

Psalm 15

Genesis 18:1-10a

Colossians 1:21-28

Luke 10:38-42

Don't just do something, sit there!

Yeah, don't just do something, sit there!

Poor Martha. Try to imagine how she felt. She'd probably heard about the little dinner party over at the house of Simon the Pharisee a few weeks before...you know, the party where the woman came in and poured all that expensive ointment on Jesus's feet, and where Jesus gave Simon a hard time for not being a good host. She'd probably heard all about that party and was determined that no one was going to be able to talk about *her* being a bad hostess for the next 2,000 years, so she was going to pull out all the stops.

So there she is, running around the house like a chicken with its head cut off, and what does she see but her sister Mary sitting and chatting with Jesus. *Imagine that!* Mary actually sitting and talking to the guest when there's other important stuff to be done so that the rules of hospitality can be taken care of, and Jesus can leave knowing that he had been treated well. Of course Martha was upset. Wouldn't you be upset if you were trying to get all the napkins perfectly matched up while your

spouse sat there chatting with one of the guests?

So Martha asked Jesus to make Mary help her with the details. If you have kids, or have ever been one of a set of siblings, you know what *that* probably sounded like..."Jesus, make her help me. It's not fair, I'm doing all the work!"

And what does Jesus say? He tells Martha, "don't just do something, sit there." And to add insult to injury he tells her that Mary's actually doing the thing that's most important...by just sitting there and chatting with him. Not quite what she expected to hear.

And not quite what we expect to hear either.

We get so caught up in always *doing* that we begin to think that if we're just sitting around, if we're just relaxing and chatting with friends, we're wasting time that could be devoted to *doing* something. Cleaning the house, washing the dishes, mowing the lawn...and ignoring *people*. But we're not the first generation to have this problem. Martha shows us that.

Jesus said that Martha was distracted by everything she was doing. Now obviously, if you're distracted, you're being distracted from something. What was she distracted from? From being with the guest...the guest who was the whole reason behind doing everything in the first place. And so he tells her, "Don't just do something, sit there. Be with me. Be a good hostess by being with me. Remember what the reason is for being a good hostess in the first place."

Have you ever heard of the 80/20 rule? That's the rule that says you get the job 80% done with 20% of the effort, but to get the last 20% done, it takes 80% of the effort. In other words, you can get five jobs done reasonably well in the same amount of time it takes to do one absolutely perfectly. I don't know about you, but I'd rather get five jobs done reasonably well done than one perfectly and the other four still waiting to be taken care of. I can imagine Jesus saying, "Martha, you've done enough. Sit down. Talk with me. That's more important to me than you following the rules of hospitality down to the last detail."

Notice what Jesus *didn't* say. He didn't tell her to keep on with the preparations while Mary sat at his feet. No, he told her that she seemed distracted by what she was doing, and that Mary had done all that was really necessary.

Martha was busy following the rules and missing the point. And don't we all do that every now and then?

Okay, so now you know that maybe you shouldn't throw a fit when your spouse is busy chatting with one of the guests while

you're frantically trying to get those ugly dishwasher spots off the glasses, and that maybe you shouldn't worry about the spots anyway...if your friends are that picky, maybe they're not really your friends. But what does this have to do with us as the church? Is there anything in today's gospel reading besides some common sense on how to treat guests? I think there is.

Martha was following the rules and missing the point. She was so busy trying to be a good hostess that she was missing the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus, and for those of you who aren't exactly up on ancient history, to sit at someone's feet was a sign of being a disciple of that person. Martha was so distracted that she didn't have time to sit and be a disciple. She was so busy with the details that were only important because of who the guest was that she didn't have time for the guest. She followed the rules and missed the point.

Do we do that? Do we worry too much about the organizational rules of the church and forget why the church exists in the first place? Do we worry so much about the physical appearance of the church building that we try to curtail certain joyful uses of it which might put a nick here or a scratch there? Do we worry so much about the choir singing perfectly that they're unable to sing joyfully? (I've always heard that the choir in Hell sings note perfect, but the choir in Heaven enjoys what they're doing). Do we try so hard to be the *good* people of this church that we forget that the reason there's a church in the first place is because we all have a skeleton or two in our closets, and that we need to be a support group for others who are just as bad as we are?

Are so busy trying to do as the church that we miss a golden opportunity to sit at his feet?

There is another issue to consider. Why was Martha doing what she was doing? If she was anything like us, it's very likely that it was because she was uncomfortable with having such a guest in her home, and wanted to make sure that her home was worthy of such a visit. In short, she, as many of us do now, was trying to *earn* Jesus's favor. This is something that we all know in our heads, can't be done, and yet something that we all get confused about from time to time. We confuse doing to earn with doing as a joyful response. And I ask you, really, what can you give to the person who has made it all? I can just imagine Jesus saying to Martha, "Sit down already. Stop trying to do for me, and let me do for you. *That's* what I came for. If I need something, I'll let you know. but right now what I want is for you to sit."

Are we guilty of behaving like this sometimes? How many times have you volunteered to do something for the church, not because it was a joyful response, but because you thought you owed it, because you felt you had to do it to earn your place here? How many of you have schedules full of church activities, but no time to sit and listen...too distracted to maybe hear him say "someone else can do this, for now I want you to sit and let me be with you" or "you've done enough with this, there's something else I think you should do right now"?

I recently read about a man from a missionary family who said that when he was a kid his parents never had time to do any parent/child stuff with him because they

were so busy with their important missionary work. Perhaps they were so distracted by trying to *do* that they gave this guy the idea that religion is something that takes you away from your family. Maybe they needed to sit and listen for a bit.

You see, the good news here is that we don't have to do. Remember, we are saved by grace through faith. There is nothing we can do to earn it. Mary seemed to have a grip on that idea...that Jesus was there because he loved them, not because they had proved they were worthy by getting rid of the waxy build up on their kitchen floor. Martha needed to be reminded of that. And we need to be reminded of it too.

So what do we do? Well notice that Jesus didn't exactly say that Martha shouldn't do anything, but just that she was distracted by all that she was trying to do...and that she was concentrating totally on one thing when there was something else that was also important. Yes, there are times when the organizational rules are important, when the appearance of the building is important, when we should worry about what the choir sounds like, and when we ought to put our best foot forward. There are also times when we *do* need to give our time to some church activity.

But there are other times when we should stop trying to *do*...and just sit there...and listen.

Don't just do something...sit there.