

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**

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**Loving God**

Luke 10:39

I reported in a sermon several weeks ago that I was surprised to discover ancestors who left New England to become Baptists in the South. I am continuing to unravel additional layers to this story. The family made its way South under the leadership of a brother of one of my ancestors; a man named Shubael Stearns. He is cited by American church historians as one of the founding fathers of the Southern Baptist Church. But in many ways Shubael Stearns does not fit the profile that one would expect from a founder of the Southern Baptist Church. Stearns was a Calvinist. He organized a Baptist Church Association that looked a lot like a presbytery. He also valued the ministry contributions of women. He created leadership offices for women; the office of Elderess and the office of Deaconess. He also affirmed the role of women in preaching and leading worship. He encouraged the ministry of his sister who was a talented preacher. For the 1750s this was really pushing the envelope. It would take the Presbyterians another 175 years to fully affirm the leadership of women in the church. And of course Southern Baptists still have not embraced this feature of their founder's ministry.

But what I find most interesting about Shubael Stearns is not the innovations he pioneered but the journey that took him to the backcountry of the Carolinas. He was ordained after becoming a Baptist in New England. He soon learned that there wasn't much of an audience for his preaching in New England. He migrated to Virginia. More people turned out to hear him in Virginia but he still wasn't getting the kind of response he wanted. Then he began to hear reports about people in the backcountry of the Carolinas. He heard that in these frontier areas people were so hungry for the grace of God that they would travel 40 miles to hear a sermon. In most cases that meant traveling by horse or by foot through areas that had no roads. When Stearns heard these reports he made a fateful decision. He determined that these were the people that God had called him to serve.

This is the kind of journey that Jesus is undertaking in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. The gospel writer tells us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. On this journey Jesus' ministry is guided not by social convention but by the needs of those who are hungry for the grace of God. Luke tells us that Jesus was not afraid to push the envelope. In chapter 10 Jesus is doing something no rabbi of that time would ever do. He is a guest in the home of two women, the sisters Mary and Martha. To make matters worse, Jesus permits Mary to sit at his feet as if she were a disciple. In Jesus' society this was a role that was reserved for men. There were rabbis of that day who said, "It is better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman." There were rabbis who said, "It is better to teach a daughter to be a prostitute than to teach her the Torah." Those who observe Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus understand that this disciple and this rabbi have crossed a dangerous line.

This is the source of intense anxiety which underlines the words that Martha has with Jesus. Her complaint is not so much about wanting help in the kitchen as it is a challenge to Jesus to think again about the dangerous situation he is creating for Mary. Jesus' response to Martha conveys his sense of urgency about his last journey to Jerusalem. Mary is hungry for the grace of God but she is not alone. Wherever he goes, Jesus sees the intensity of this hunger. Speaking to this need is the central task of his life. Jesus refuses to be distracted from that task.

This hunger for the grace of God is at the heart of the journey of Abraham and Sarah in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis. Abraham and Sarah are responding to God's call to become the father and mother of a great nation. But they are a childless couple who are beyond the age of bearing children. From their perspective the journey leads to nothing more promising than a dead end. But the biblical writer sees the situation of Abraham and Sarah in a different light. Their barrenness is understood as a sign of the spiritual emptiness of the entire human family. Their journey demonstrates the hunger for grace that all of us experience. The barrenness of Abraham and Sarah provides the opportunity for God to bless the entire human family. The biblical writer announces that God intervenes to do just that.

This is how Luke understood Jesus' mission, too. Jesus is creating disciples who will bless the human family. Luke's story of Martha and Mary is paired with Luke's earlier story of the Good Samaritan. Both flow from the answer the lawyer gives to Jesus' question about the law. The lawyer answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind." Then he continues, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27)." Luke uses the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate how one loves one's neighbor. The story of Martha and Mary becomes the illustration of how one loves God. Luke is trying to define discipleship for the early church. Discipleship requires loving neighbor and loving God. Both of these are depicted in surprising and somewhat scandalous ways. It is the hated Samaritan who demonstrates how to love the neighbor. It is the culturally suspect woman disciple who shows us how to love God. Mary demonstrates that loving God begins with bringing our emptiness and taking our place at Jesus' feet.

John Brown was an 18<sup>th</sup> century pastor who was a leader of the Seceder movement in the Scottish church. The Seceders developed a way of doing church which later influenced Presbyterians in America. Brown lived in a time when the mortality rate of children was very high. Brown provided pastoral care to many people who had experienced the deaths of beloved children. To one grieving father he wrote these words:

Dear Sir: I desire to sympathize with you in your affliction. Experience hath made me to know how hard it is to part with a pleasant child...In this stroke, I am sure, God is righteous....What you have met with on this occasion, appears to me an evidence, so far as I can see into the secrets of Jehovah, that God has at once taken your child to himself, and in some measure taken your child's room in your heart...Learn from the death of children, to pant for the everliving God... (Quoted by Shelly Sanders Zuckerman in "Spiritual Formation Through Psalm-Singing Worship," from *Call to Worship*, Volume 40.1, page 74).

Brown understood that grief has much to teach us about our hunger for the grace of God. It is at Jesus' feet that that our emptiness is filled. It is there that God's grace transforms our hearts for the purpose of loving God and loving neighbors.