

## Sermon "Collaboration"

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

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On the 50th anniversary of Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon after traveling a quarter of a million miles into the heavens, this week's lectionary reading includes a portion of the travel narrative in Luke 10. The chapter begins with the commissioning of the seventy. They are sent out on their journeys fully aware of their dependency upon God's gracious love expressed through the hospitality of others. The well-known Samaritan story about four travelers follows the commissioning and serves as a reminder of how vulnerable we all are. The chapter closes with Jesus traveling on his own journey to Jerusalem. He finds refuge in the home of two sisters who were dear friends and gracious hosts. Hear now the Word of God.

*<sup>38</sup> Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him 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." <sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup> there is need of only one thing.<sup>[a]</sup> Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "Collaboration"

*The Text: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Luke 10:40b*

Let us pray: Gracious and Loving God, we thank you for the gift of collaboration and for the many nuances and dimensions within the life you call us to live as disciples. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon after traveling a quarter of a million miles into the heavens is a superb example of collaboration. Merriam-Webster defines collaboration as the process of working jointly with others especially in an intellectual endeavor.

When President Kennedy announced his goal in 1961, he stated, "In a very real sense, it will not be one man going to the moon...it will be an entire nation." Over the next eight years, success depended upon people like Morgan Watson, a black man from the segregated school houses of rural Louisiana who became NASA's first African-American engineer; Frances "Poppy" Northcut, a high-school valedictorian and onetime beauty contestant from the Texas oil patch who began as a computress and became one of NASA's first woman engineers working on Apollo 8; Katherine Johnson, the African-American, Presbyterian mathematician featured in the film *Hidden Figures* whose calculations of orbital mechanics were so critical John Glen would not fly until she checked the numbers; Alan Contessa, a working-class kid from New York City's outer boroughs who worked on the Apollo 11 lunar module; and John Wolfram, a rebel with a patriotic streak from the Wisconsin countryside who served as a Navy Seal on the rescue team for the Apollo 11 splash down.

According to Clare Ansberry in the July 14, 2019 Wall Street Journal article “Reach for the Moon,” these individuals joined more than 300,000 Americans from seamstresses to scientists, welded in common purpose making those first steps possible. In the midst of a decade torn apart by racism, sexism, shrinking opportunity, drugs and war, the space travel “looking upward into the heavens” provided an opportunity for collaboration and solidarity within a diverse and gifted team. Frank Sinatra added inspiration with his swing version of “Fly Me to the Moon” released in 1964 and ultimately played on Buzz Aldrin’s tape deck during the lunar landing.

Within the travel narrative in today’s lectionary reading, Martha was looking for a little collaboration from her sister Mary in the kitchen as she served their guest Jesus. Sadly, over the years, Martha has been criticized for what appears to be a reasonable request. A closer look at the historical and cultural context of this reading along with where it is placed in Luke’s travel narrative enlightens our understanding of this simple yet profound story.

Luke places the story of Martha and Mary immediately following the story of the Good Samaritan because each emphasizes important complementary characteristics in the life of a disciple following the commission of the seventy. To the lawyer who is so caught up in studying the Torah that he never learned how to do it, Jesus shares the story of the Good Samaritan and bids him “Go and do likewise.” To the young sisters who are caught up in a society that denies them the privilege of studying the Torah, Jesus encourages them “to sit at his feet and to listen to what he is saying.”

Luke has taken us on a journey and pointed out the importance of collaboration, balance, and reaching beyond ourselves within our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Collaboration includes both doing and listening, serving and studying, singlemindedness and multi-tasking. Each of us has a tendency toward a one dimensional life. We need collaboration within ourselves and with one another to fulfill our calling as disciples.

However, there is something more in both these narratives. When the lawyer asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” he invites Jesus into an ongoing dialogue among first century Jews, according to biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias in his book The Parables of Jesus. There was disagreement as to how far one’s responsibility extended in this duty to love. It was generally agreed that the term “neighbor” meant fellow countrymen, including Jews and converted Gentiles. Jesus chose to go beyond this small-minded debate. The hatred between the Jews and Samaritans (the mixed people) had always been strong but was especially heightened during Christ’s day. When Jesus brought a Samaritan into the story, he stripped the lawyer of his pious defenses—exposing his lack of understanding with regard to God, life, and the duty to love.

When I visited the Holy Land thirty-five years ago and traveled along the rugged road between Jerusalem and Jericho, our guide articulated that hostility. “The Jewish man,” she said, “would have preferred to be dead than give honor to a Samaritan.” Within Jewish law, this man would have been honor bound to accept the Samaritan into his family and enter into a reciprocal, mutual relationship. And so death—the end of life—seemed more tolerable than the thought of honoring a life which is hated. Jesus has revealed more than a simple act of hospitality in this parable. By cutting through the niceties of religious talk, he has helped us confront our irrational biases and prejudices.

If the Good Samaritan is a paradox in a Jewish story about the duty to love one’s neighbor, then Mary is as paradox in a story about the duty to study God’s word. The cultural

distinctions are important in understanding why Mary's behavior was so radical. This was not a woman so caught up in a conversation that she abandoned her sister in the kitchen. To sit at Jesus' feet was to put oneself in the place of a male disciple, violating a clear social boundary. According to rabbinic lore in the Mishnah: "Let thy house be a meeting house for Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst...but talk not much to womankind." By inviting Mary to sit at his feet, Jesus has affirmed more than a simple act of listening, he has confronted the unreasonable social and educational barriers to women in that time and calls women to full discipleship with their brothers.

These two stories placed side by side exemplify the greatest commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus' choice of unlikely characters to illustrate the love of neighbor and the love of God – a Samaritan and a woman reveal how we limit collaboration through our own prejudices and the cultural biases that prevent a level playing field for all God's children. However, Jesus did more than talk about the duty to love. Jesus loved us absolutely, irrationally, and completely when his journey culminated in Jerusalem and he embraced the cross. He loved us with his heart, soul, strength, mind and life to expose, to break down, and to free us from the walls of our own hostility and the stereotypes that limit us.

As we seek to be faithful disciples within our own travel narratives, may we share the gift of collaboration in reaching beyond ourselves to one another and to the heavens. May we demonstrate the compassion of the Good Samaritan, the courage of Mary, and the hospitality of Martha on the journeys we travel. By the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the sustenance of the Holy Spirit, may our small steps of mercy become a giant leap for humankind. Amen.