

## **The Better Part**

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 10: 38-42

Delivered on August 18, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church and Calvary Presbyterian Church

I recently read a quote on the internet. It a little bit of a long quote, and by long I mean it's too long to fit on a bumper sticker, so I will say it twice. "The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well." Again, "The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well." Now, supposedly this is a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson. I don't know for sure that Emerson said that, but that's what the internet says, and as we all know, everything on the internet is true. Ralph Waldo Emerson, as you may remember if you learned about him in high school, was a great American thinker. He was part poet, part philosopher, part theologian; he was a friend to Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman and he was someone whose wisdom is obvious when you consider some of the other things he said. Here is one. "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." Isn't that the truth? Here's another. "Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door." You've probably heard that one before. And finally my favorite. Are you ready? Emerson said "I like the silent church before the service begins better than any preaching." Well, who doesn't?

Well, I don't know who I think I am to disagree with someone as esteemed as Emerson. But I have a confession for you today. I do not agree with this quote which says the purpose of life is not to be happy. It may sound really wise, and I agree that there is a grain of truth to it, but I think that a life where happiness is not important isn't much of a life.

Well, if we agree that Emerson sounds wise, where is the grain of truth? Well, I might even go so far as to say it has two grains of truth. The first grain is this. The purpose of life clearly is not to be happy alone. If we met a person who was only after their own happiness, and never give a thought to their neighbor or what was good for him or her, I have no doubt that we would call such a person selfish. If we met someone who only cared about eating and drinking and being merry, and that person never have a concern for the people of the world who are hungry, or oppressed, or sick, if they never had a concern for the poison that is being pumped into the air we breathe or the water we drink each day—if they never have a concern about child abuse, or domestic abuse, or even cruelty to animals—and furthermore if they never put their concerns into action, then I think we would say that person is a selfish person and that is not what life is all about. It certainly isn't what the gospel is all about, at least not the one that I've read. So the purpose of life clearly is not about happiness and nothing but happiness.

But I have said there may be two grains of truth to this quote, so what about the second grain? Well, isn't there something a little silly about trying as hard as you can to be happy? Isn't trying to be happy a little like trying to relax? I wonder, have you ever laid awake at night watching the clock tick away the hours and minutes and trying as hard as you can to relax so you could just fall asleep. But what happens, the more you try as hard as you can to relax, the more wide awake you are. And the more urgent it becomes for you to fall asleep, the more you find yourself tossing and turning because you just couldn't get there. You can't make yourself relax. You just sort of have to let it happen. Isn't it sort of the same way with happiness? You can try as hard as you can to be happy, and sometimes you just have to let it happen.

But these two things aside, I do not agree that life is not about happiness, even your own happiness. But I also think you may be surprised at just how many people believe that. I once saw a sign on a church that posted a message that if I were to ask, was probably posted from somebody who would have liked this quote from Emerson. It was in the middle of the summer when I saw it, and it looked like the kind of message you'd see on a church sign in the summer. It said God doesn't take a vacation. God doesn't take a vacation. Now, I don't know if the message of the sign was supposed to be telling people not to take a vacation from church, or not to take a vacation from serving God, or not to take a vacation from work, or perhaps all three. Whatever it was supposed to be saying, it was obviously trying to communicate some message of guilt. But whoever wrote that might actually want to reread the very first story in the bible. Because the very first story in the bible tells us that God does go on vacation, in fact. On the seventh day, it says he rested.

Today's story from the gospel of Luke is one in which Jesus is visiting Mary and Martha, two sisters who live together in the same home. We don't know a whole lot about Mary and Martha, except that they had a brother named Lazarus whom Jesus famously raised from the dead. And these two siblings, we can guess, have plenty of love and affection between the two of them, but also their fair share of bickering, too. Now, I know that no one here can possibly understand that. No one here has a brother or a sister that they ever bicker with, do they, so who can possibly understand this story? But in all seriousness, one of the things I love about the bible is that the stories we have in the bible are about real life. This isn't *Ozzie and Harriet*. This isn't *Leave It to Beaver*. This is real life and in real life there is great love and affection between siblings, but there is bickering too, and in today's story we get a snapshot into that bickering. As

Jesus is a guest in Mary and Martha's home, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him talk, but we aren't told what he is talking about. We can imagine that Jesus was talking to Mary about God, and that's probably true, but for all we know he could have been talking about politics, or about art, or about music, we just don't know. But what we do know is that they must have been enjoying each other's company, laughing and joking and relaxing, and we can imagine that because here is where the sisterly bickering starts. Martha hears all this going on and she becomes irritable. She is left alone doing all the household chores, like cooking and cleaning and chores we don't have to think about these days like fetching water from the well and milking the goats, and to be quite honest, part of Martha's irritation is also directed at Jesus, because he is allowing her to be left alone to do all this work. And so addressing Jesus, she says "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Now that sounds like a reasonable request, doesn't it? Martha is working her fingers to the bone, and Mary is sitting there being lazy, apparently, and surely Jesus must want to say, ok, Mary, break time is over. Get up and help your sister. But that's not what he says. Instead he says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her."

What is going on here? Well, part of what is going on I think is that we have a story that would only be possible between two women in Jesus' time. Women in those days were not supposed to sit around and discuss intelligent things. That was for men to do. Women were supposed to care about cooking and cleaning and raising children. And part of what is going on here was that Jesus was saying to Martha, women have minds, too. Women are not meant for a life of servitude and inferiority. That is not God's way. And our friends in other churches who

think that only men should be ordained or only men should be elders or only men should serve as pastors, I might advise them to read this story. If Jesus himself decided that women have minds that are just as valuable as any man's mind, how can any church that professes to follow Jesus declare that women don't have anything important to say? What a lot of nonsense!

But there is also a larger point here, I think. Women are not made for a life of servitude because no one is made for a life of servitude. Relax, Martha, pull up a chair. We don't need a hot meal right now, we don't need a clean house right now. Take time out to be happy. People are also made for a life of happiness. And that is why we have a Sabbath, that is why yes, even God takes vacation, and that is why anyone, I don't care if your name is Emerson, or Socrates or even Einstein, anyone is confused, anyone is misguided if they say that happiness is not a part of your purpose in life.

Years ago, I gave a commencement address for a graduating high school class and I told them all that before they began college, I hoped they all took time to celebrate what they had accomplished in completing high school. Well, someone afterward came up to me and said they thought that was sort of like telling a stone to roll down a hill. Of course they're going to celebrate. Why didn't I tell them to do something they didn't want to do? Why didn't I challenge them in some way? Well, I don't know. Maybe I should have. And if I had it to do over again, maybe that's what I'd do. But I guess I felt the need to say that because I think we sometimes forget to celebrate, and not just to celebrate our accomplishments, but celebrate life itself. Listen to the words of the psalmist. "Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud shouts of joy. For the Lord, the most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth." Again, "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy

mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth.” Again, “It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre.”

I hope no one hears the words of my sermon this morning as a call to moral indifference, moral laziness, or moral complacency. That would be to misunderstand what I am saying. But let us also never confuse God’s call to moral action as a call to us to be the saviors of the world. We don’t have to be the saviors of the world. God already gave us one savior. And that one savior is the only savior we’ll ever need.

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset over many things, only one thing is needed, [and] Mary has chosen the better part.” May all of us find the time in our lives to do the same.