

SERMON
“Being and Doing”
Becky A. Hebert
July 18, 2010
St. John’s Chapel UCC

Luke 10: 38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.

LEON

My plans were to preach on the Martha and Mary story today. It seemed the perfect passage after a vacation. You know about the virtues of moving away from Martha’s busyness and into the silence of just being present for Jesus. Now let’s be clear; in the Martha and Mary’s story, Jesus was not speaking of Mary’s being present as being better than Martha’s doing. All you have to do is look at the story that falls right before Martha and Mary’s story to know that—the story of the Good Samaritan—upon which Dr. White just preached.

But I am not going to do that. Preach on Martha and Mary that is. I’m going to tell you the story of Leon. I’ve told it to you before, but I’m going to tell it to you again because it is a story that fills that quandary between doing and being.

Everybody in town knew Leon. Leon was something of a landmark though nobody could clearly remember a time when he wasn’t to be seen hobbling up and down the street on that beat-up crutch of his. He was part of the scenery, like the statue of Washington in the park or the war memorial in the square. He differed from these in one respect though.

Nobody paid any attention to the statue or the war memorial except maybe on Washington's Birthday or Veterans' Day, but everyone had learned to take notice of Leon's presence.

Anyone who had lived in the town for any length of time knew that if they saw Leon coming down the street toward them, the prudent thing to do was to think of a reason to cross over to the other side before he got to them. It wasn't hard, he moved pretty slowly, and it saved spending the next half hour trying to get away from him.

Leon's version of "conversation" was always the same, so much so that the wittier folk in town could do impressions of him that were sure to bring their neighbors to tears of laughter. Not that what he said was funny, it was just that they had all heard it so many times it had become a caricature of itself.

Leon seemed to be on a mission to convert everybody in town from their sinful ways – and not just the town rowdies, but the good upstanding folks as well. Since most people considered themselves to be part of this latter group, some took offense at Leon's implication that they needed to hear this message. This message was always the same: Repent, Repent, Repent! REPENT!! Oh, he never claimed to be a moral paragon himself. He had told the story of how his leg had been shattered in the accident caused by his drunkenness so many times that some had come to wish that his mouth had been shattered as well. He said that his lameness was the judgment that he willingly bore to atone for his sins and to show others what pain their unrighteousness would bring them.

Of course, no one ever got mad at Leon to his face. After all, he was just a little crazy.

Leon was not unaware of the strategies people used to avoid him, and he had developed a few counter-strategies of his own. For example, he had taken to standing in front of the post office for most of the day. Since in order to check their mail people had to come to the post

office, he positioned himself in front of the door where they would have to pass by him to get in or out. This tactic worked pretty well, although many folk took to checking their mail every two, three, or even four days. Some learned to wait until Leon had another helpless citizen pinned down before they would attempt sneaking into the post office.

On Sunday, most of the town people spent part of the morning in church. There were three churches in town; one Catholic, two Protestant. Leon attended none of these (to everyone's relief – particularly the pastors'.) Leon felt that to be Christian meant that he should be a simple and humble man. The pomp and ceremony of the Catholic Church didn't fit his idea of simplicity and humility, and it was his opinion that the Protestants in town spent far too much of their time congratulating themselves on being saved. So on Sunday mornings, Leon got up at five as usual and spent several hours reading his Bible and praying to God about the people in the town. His prayer was always the same: He prayed that the people would recognize their sinfulness and come to repentance, and, if it be God's will, that his humility and fortitude in suffering might serve as an example to them.

Since the post office gambit didn't work on Sundays of course, Leon had another strategy for that day. Along about eleven o'clock, he'd show up in the parking lot of the Wal-Mart on the grocery store side. He'd stand about ten feet in front of the door to the grocery store. Wal-Mart was now the only grocery store left in town, and almost the only store in town. Besides the Laundromat, it was the only thing open on Sunday. Starting a few minutes past eleven, Catholics on their way home from ten o'clock mass would be stopping by to pick up some little thing they needed for Sunday dinner. An hour later, the Protestants coming from their eleven o'clock service would start showing up.

Just as on the street and in front of the post office, here too, people developed methods to avoid Leon. One would pull up in a car and park at the far side of the lot. This person would stay in their car rummaging through the glove compartment or fiddling with the radio until another car pulled up. Then both drivers would leap out and strike up a conversation which they would try to maintain all the way into the store in the hope that Leon wouldn't interrupt. Sometimes it worked. Other times one of them would be caught, but the other would press on toward the door, pausing only after getting inside to look back at the sacrificial lamb being slaughtered on Leon's altar.

Jimmy, the manager of Wal-Mart, didn't much like having Leon out there, but what could he say to the crazy old man? Besides, nobody in his or her right mind would actually start a conversation with Leon.

One Sunday, at about eleven forty-five (during the lull between the Catholics and the Protestants), an old beat-up Camaro pulled into the Wal-Mart lot driven by a young woman. She had moved to town a month or so before when the regional chain that bought out the auto parts store had transferred her in as a bookkeeper. No one in town knew much about her except that she wore more make-up and more revealing clothes than the other women in town. The guys at the auto parts store said she kept pretty much to herself and their wives thought that was just fine.

She got out the car and started toward the door. No one knows for sure what Leon said to her, but some speculated later that he had probably served up one of the sermons he usually reserved for women who were thought to be "loose." After listening to him for a few moments, her face hardened into a mask of pain and anger. She stormed past him into the

store. Instead of going down the aisle to get whatever she had come for, she walked straight to the office to find the manager.

“That old man just insulted me. Are you going to tell him to quit brothering people in front of the store, or did you put him up to it?”

“Well ma’am, I didn’t tell him to stand there if that’s what you mean, but I can’t just tell him to git. He’s kind of a pain, but he doesn’t really do any harm.”

“Well, if you can’t tell him, I’m sure your district manager can. I’ll call him tomorrow.”

With that she turned and stormed out of the store, past Leon, and into her car. Her tires threw up a spray of gravel as she roared out of the lot.

Jimmy turned to his wife Margie who was helping out in the office. “I guess I’m gonna have to do something about the old man, but I don’t want to go out there and get into it with him. Maybe if I call the police station, one of the guys can come down and get him to leave.”

The cruiser pulled into the lot driven by one third of the town’s police force. The officer talked with Leon, as the Protestants who had begun to show up looked on from inside the store. It was easy to see that Leon wasn’t giving an inch. Finally, in desperation, the officer bundled him into the back of the car and drove off.

Back at the station, the officer talked with the dispatcher about what to do with Leon while the old man sat in a chair across the office.

“The chief said he’d be at that picnic over in Springfield until five or so. I don’t think he’d want us to run Leon in to the County Jail, but if we let him go, he’ll just go back down to Wal-Mart. Maybe we should just put him in the holding cell until the chief gets back.”

When the door to the holding cell opened, Leon found it to be occupied. Perry had lived all his twenty-four years in the town. After high school, he had gone full time at the grain

elevator and had married Lois. They had lived a quiet little life together until the previous morning when Lois had announced that she was tired of their quiet little life, and she had left him and the town. That night, for the first time in anyone's recollection, Perry had shown up at the tavern and sitting alone at the far end of the bar, had proceeded to get drunk. When the bartender had tried to cut him off, he had gotten belligerent. The police had been called. When Leon found him in the cell, he was sitting on the left-hand bunk with his chin in his hands. The remains of his torn shirt lay on the floor at his feet where the officers had thrown it in after the night before. He was staring at the wall and did not look up when Leon entered.

Leon, who knew what had happened to Perry just as did nearly the whole town by now, silently prayed, "Thank you God for bringing me to this place. I will gladly endure this suffering so that I may bring this wretched sinner to repentance."

Perry did not acknowledge Leon's presence but continued to stare at the wall even as Leon preached to him. Leon was undaunted by this lack of response. He continued to hammer away at Perry – eager to seize the moment in which this sinner might be turned from his unrighteousness. What a vindication this boy's conversion would be for Leon.

After a while Leon began to tire, and so he sat down on the bunk leaning his crutch against the wall. He continued to preach, but still he got no response. Finally, as the activities of the day began to take their toll on the old man, he decided to rest a while before returning to the task of saving Perry. He fired off a few good points for Perry to consider, and then laid back on the bunk and soon was asleep.

For a long time neither of the two men in the holding cell moved. Then slowly Perry stood up. He stepped across the cell to where Leon's crutch leaned against the wall and

reached out his hand and took hold of it. Then he stepped back and sat down again on his bunk with the crutch across his knees.

The top of the crutch had once had a rubber pad, but this had long since fallen away and been replaced by a piece of green and white cloth wrapped around and held with a safety pin. Now all that remained of this was a scrap of fabric and the safety pin. Perry removed the pin and let the cloth fall off. He reached down to the floor and picked up what was left of his shirt, tore a big hunk out of the back, and wrapped it around the top of the crutch, securing it with the safety pin.

Then he stood up again, stepped across the cell and replaced the crutch where it had stood. He turned, went back to his bunk, sat for a moment, then laid down and closed his eyes.

If that's not the perfect story of being truly present and doing, all wrapped up into one, I don't know what is. For when we are present for another as if they were Jesus, no matter how much they don't look like Jesus—and we feel the needs of someone past the point of seeing the error of their ways, we are then the Good Samaritan.