

SERMON: The Balancing Act of Faith

TEXT: Luke 10:38-42

“I would like to take this opportunity to ask every person listening in, whoever and wherever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his or her own way.” These words were transmitted by radio fifty years ago – July 20, 1969 – by an ordained Presbyterian elder named Edwin Aldrin. “Buzz” – as he was more commonly known, was a member of Webster Presbyterian Church, located near Houston, Texas.

And after he spoke these words, Aldrin took a moment to read silently from John 15:5 - [the words of Jesus] - which he had scrawled on a 3-by-5-inch card: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.” The Apollo 11 lunar module pilot, with fellow astronaut Neil Armstrong by his side, then poured a bit of wine into a small chalice given him by his church. In a later interview, he described it: *“In the one-sixth gravity of the moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were communion elements.”* (Emily McFarlan

Miller Jack Jenkins, *5 faith facts about the moon landing: Space Communion and a prayer league of its own*, July 17, 2019, www.religionnews.com)

This is one of the coolest stories ever, in my opinion. And if you're wondering why you never heard it before, it's because NASA would give permission for Buzz Aldrin to celebrate the sacrament *only* if he agreed to keep it quiet.

It is also interesting to note that Webster Presbyterian Church – the church of the astronauts – still celebrates Lunar Communion Sunday every year on or around July 20.

I share this story with you not only because it's totally cool, not only because it's timely, but I believe it's a deeply profound statement of faith and an amazing example of THE BALANCING ACT OF FAITH.

Think about it for a moment. This IS rocket science. These are astronauts. Highly intelligent, highly educated, doing a job that requires unimaginable focus and unceasing attention to thousands of highly complex details. They are doing something that has never been done before and that has been proven to work only in theory, with a level of mathematics and technology and physics and engineering

that most of us have no concept of. And “Buzz” over here wants to stop and say a prayer, and read from the Bible, and take communion.

Put it alongside the Mary and Martha story. Buzz Aldrin plays the part of Mary, and the other astronauts are Martha. Can’t you just you just hear them? “Really, Buzz? C’mon. Little bit of work to do over here. Kind of important. Pretty sure the whole country – probably the whole world – is praying for us so, we’re covered. Not to mention we’re actually IN the heavens, so communion is probably not really necessary at this point. Jesus, listen, I know you’re around here somewhere. Could you please tell Buzz to put the wine away and start looking for some rocks?”

Of course, this is only my imagination talking, but like Martha, the other astronauts make a good point. For Martha, it was cooking a meal for guests in their home. Somebody has to do it or everybody will go hungry. It really does seem kind of selfish for Mary not to lend a hand.

But if we look more closely, Jesus does not scold Martha for her busy-ness, nor does he say her work is unimportant. Martha asks, “Lord, do you not care that

my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” Jesus does care. He answers, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.”

It always sounds to us like a scolding. But what if we picture Jesus standing up and coming close to Martha. He leans in to look into her eyes, “Martha.” Then he takes her face gently in his hands, “Martha.” He’s trying to get her attention. He’s trying to bring her back from that swirling, anxious flurry.

Jesus doesn’t want to see Martha worried and distracted – especially not because of his visit. He did not come for the food she would prepare. He came to see her and Mary. He came to nurture the relationship he had with them, to talk with them, to look into their eyes, to laugh and cry with them, and to enjoy time spent together. That’s hard to do if Martha’s in the kitchen the whole time.

One commentary I read quoted from theologian John Shea, who observed that when we read the English, “Mary has chosen *the better part*, in Greek the word is translated as *good*. Mary has chosen the *good* part, meaning she has chosen *the connection to God who is good, the ground and energy of effective action*. He sees the story not as reinforcing a Martha-Mary dichotomy but calling for a recognition that God is both inside and outside, sustaining us while

summoning us to work and, through our service, to bring about a world of justice, mercy, and peace. It is not an either/or message but a both/and message.” (James A. Wallace, C.S.S.R., Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3, 2010)

In my last presbytery, I served on a committee with the presbytery’s treasurer. He took the finances of the organization very seriously, and he was passionate about ensuring financial stability. But he refused to come to the first thirty minutes of the meeting when we spent time in prayer. He said it was a waste of time, that we had important business to conduct, and he had better things to do. He seemed almost angry that prayer was part of the agenda.

But prayer has to be part of the agenda. Not because the Book of Order requires it. But because our relationship with Jesus requires it.

After the Eagle had landed on the moon, Buzz Aldrin took that 3x5 card from his pocket and read the words of Jesus from John 15:5. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.” Buzz Aldrin believed that the moon landing was part of God’s eternal plan for humanity. So the importance of the work had to be matched by his attention to God. Buzz Aldrin needed to remind himself – and his

fellow astronauts and the world – that none of it was possible without the Lord.

When we are cut off from the vine that is Christ, we wither and perish. We become worried and distracted and anxious and out of focus.

I remember hearing a sermon based on the Letter of James and the argument about faith versus works and which will ultimately save us. The preacher used the metaphor of a rowboat with only one oar. If you have only faith or only works, your rowboat will only go around and around in a circle, getting nowhere. But if you have one oar called faith and another oar called works, then you can make progress on the journey.

Similarly, we understand that every coin has two sides. They look different, but they spend the same. You need both for the coin to have value.

Jesus loved Mary and Martha equally, though they each had different styles, different personalities, and different priorities. Martha was eager to serve Jesus; Mary was eager to listen to Jesus.

The church – and the world – needs people who will work and people who will pray. We need the old and the young; we need male and female and the whole spectrum of gender; we need all sizes, shapes, colors, and origins.

And each of us as individual disciples needs to support and sustain our work with prayer, and to allow our prayers to inspire us into action. This is THE BALANCING ACT OF FAITH.

We each have a Mary and a Martha inside of us. May we allow them to work and pray together... for the glory of God!

AMEN.