

"This is It!"

17 July 2005

Bible passage: **Luke 10: 38-42** (TEV)

As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him in her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat down at the feet of Jesus and listened to his teaching. Martha was upset over all the work she had to do, so she came to Jesus and said, "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!"

Jesus answered her, "Martha, Martha! You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed. Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken away from her."

One of the books on the best seller list is by Malcolm Gladwell, and it's entitled *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. The very first story the author tells is about something that happened in September of 1983 at the J. Paul Getty Museum in California. An art dealer approached the museum, and said that he had in his possession a 6th century BC marble statue of a nude male youth standing with his left leg forward and his arms at his sides. These statues are very rarely found, and most are badly damaged or in fragments when they are uncovered by archeologists. However, this one appeared to be in near perfect condition, and the asking price was just under \$10 million.

Wisely, the Getty moved quite cautiously, and began a thorough investigation. The documents that came with the statue were carefully examined, and experts subjected the statue to all kinds of elaborate testing. After 14 months of extensive examination, the Getty was satisfied, and they agreed to buy the statue. This find was newsworthy and was highlighted in the press.

Just before the museum finalized the deal for the statue, Evelyn Harrison, one of the world's foremost experts on Greek sculpture, was in Los Angeles visiting the museum. They took her down to see the statue, and the then curator of the museum told her, "It isn't ours yet, but it will be in a couple of weeks." Harrison's comment was, "I'm sorry to hear that." She couldn't explain exactly what she saw, but she knew instinctively that something

was not right.

The next expert to view the statue had a similar response. He said that the first word that popped into his head was "fresh," not exactly what we would expect to hear about a 2000 year old piece of art. That expert said to the curator, "Have you paid for this?" Without waiting for a response, he continued, "If you have, try to get your money back. If you haven't, don't."

Even after the months of extensive examination of the statue, the Getty began to get worried, and convened a special symposium on the statue, taking it to Athens and inviting the Greek experts to take a look. The response was overwhelming that this was not the real thing. After tracing the paper trail to its origins, the museum came to understand that the statue was actually created sometime around 1980; it was indeed a fake. The Getty was quite embarrassed by the turn of events, and wondered how their thorough analytical research had totally missed the truth of the situation, while experts in the field knew it was a fake from the very first instant that they saw the statue.

Actually, the museum made its decision the way many businesses and corporations and I dare say, many of us make ours—we examine all the materials as thoroughly and carefully as we can, weigh all the possibilities, and make the best decision based on the facts. The facts in many cases are so overwhelming that the decision seems relatively easy, but is it always the best one? This morning, I want us to think about how we make the right decisions. How do we choose the best thing, especially if there's the chance that our data could be wrong? What other options exist for making the big choices of life?

The Bible passage we have for this morning is only obliquely about making choices, and there are many other points we could make with it. However, for our purposes today, I want us to focus on the choice that was made in our story—the story of two sisters Mary and Martha, who were friends of Jesus. The sisters are really two very different types of people, I'd say that Martha was your typical worker-bee type of person, always being concerned about how she could be the perfect hostess by preparing the proper meal, and serving her guests in a timely and adequate way. Mary, on the other hand, appears to have been quite different—maybe more free-spirited, probably more interested in learning than in doing what was expected of her and women of the day, who were in charge of tending the house, and that was pretty much it.

At any rate, Jesus came to their house to be their guest for the evening, and Martha was busying herself in the

kitchen getting the meal ready. Her sister Mary was not hanging around the kitchen, but rather had plopped herself down at the feet of Jesus and was listening to what he was sharing with the rest of the group. Martha was put out with Mary's lack of work, and complained to Jesus, asking him to tell Mary to get back to the kitchen.

I can just see Jesus smiling a little, and shaking his head gently, as he said to Martha, "Oh, Martha, you're worried about too many things, but only one is really important." Those aren't exactly his words, but close. Now we can read all kinds of things into that—like maybe a bit of a judgment call about Martha being too busy to spend time with her guests, or about how a clean house and the perfect meal aren't always the most important things, or more. Instead, he just continues by saying, "Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken from her."

He said, "Mary has chosen the right thing..." What does that mean, and how did she make that choice? Did she analyze the whole situation and determine that, with all the data and information in, that she should sit and learn from Jesus rather than helping her sister entertain? Or was it one of those times that she intuitively knew might not come her way again, and she quickly chose to take advantage of it? We don't know because we only have a little vignette of the story, but I'd be willing to bet that it was the latter. Somehow Mary knew that spending time with Jesus was the right thing to be doing, and it was an almost instinctive decision, when she didn't have hard facts and data to back it up. She just did it on the basis of what we often call that "sixth sense," our intuition, and Jesus seems to be confirming that that's a good thing to do. In fact, I even wonder if Jesus is hinting at the fact that this gut feeling, this intuition, might even be God's way of helping us make the right decision.

Just how reliable is our intuition? Is it fail-proof? Certainly not, but then, the Getty museum story points out the fact that sometimes the data isn't fail-proof either. In reality, when it comes to making any major life decision, there's never 100% certainty. There can't be because none of us knows what the outcome of any decision will be. It's probably important to gather as much reliable information as we can, but too much can be absolutely inundating, and we become the victims of "analysis paralysis." When we're in our information collection stage, it's probably a good idea to sift through what we've gathered, and edit it down to a few choice pieces of information, which is incidentally, often information that we collected in the first few moments of our research.

However, it's impossible for us to make good decisions solely on the basis of the information and data we gather. We are human beings, and the human factor plays a role in every decision we make. Therefore, we really

aren't capable, regardless of what we think, of making decisions that are completely dispassionate and rational.

We all have the gut instinct that we have to pay attention to, too, and it's important to understand that we can, in Gladwell's terms "know without knowing." For sure, sometimes our intuition can lead us astray, but I would guess that most of the time, if we do our preparation and planning, we need to listen to what our gut is telling us. We need to honor that instinctive and intuitive part of ourselves.

Some of us are used to doing that as a result of our training and practice. Take any kind of worker who has to make decisions under pressure, like firefighters, doctors, nurses, workers in intensive care units, EMT's, and others. In the heat of battle, there often isn't time to make a logical and systematic study of all the options. In those kinds of situations, and in the kinds that many of us experience in the course of living our lives, we have to size up the situation quickly and act on the basis of experience and intuition.

One of the situations that Gladwell talks about in his book is that of a firefighter who shared something that had happened years before, a time when he had to make a hard, split-second decision. When he was a lieutenant, he was on a relatively routine call on a fire run. The fire was coming from the back of the one-story house in a residential area, in the kitchen. The firefighters broke down the front door, laid their hose across the house, and began throwing water on the flames. According to the fireman, that should have extinguished the fire, but it didn't. They sprayed the fire again, and still nothing happened, so they began to retreat back through the living room. The lieutenant said he thought to himself that something was wrong, so he turned to his fellow firefighters and shouted, "Let's get out of here, now!" Seconds after they exited, the floor on which they had been standing collapsed. The fire, it turned out, had been in the basement.

The lieutenant couldn't explain why he had ordered everyone out; he just sensed that something wasn't right. In retrospect, he could analyze the situation and understand why he thought something was wrong, but at the time, he didn't make any of those connections consciously. He was acting solely on the basis of that sixth sense, and it was a good thing, because had they all stopped to discuss the situation and try to figure it out, the end result might have been tragic.

You and I may be faced at some time in our lives with those life-or-death situations that demand that we act, and act now, and I'm relatively sure that we will respond instinctively and do the right thing. However, not every decision is the kind of thing where we'll run to rescue our child from the street or have to make a quick move to

avert disaster. Sometimes our decisions don't have to be quite so quickly made. How do we know the right balance between basing our decision on the data we gather to analyze the situation, and trusting our gut response to the issue in question?

I'm sure that varies from person to person, but I believe it needs to be a mixture of both, because both can be exactly right, and both have the potential of being wrong. It seems to me that the best way for us to make any decision is to ask God to guide us in the midst of our study and research, and to ask God to help us listen, really listen, to what our inner self is telling us. And maybe, just maybe, that sixth sense, that "knowing without knowing" may be God's way of leading us forward. I can tell you this—God will not lead us astray. If we trust God completely, then I believe that we, like Mary, will choose the right thing.

Closing:

Indianapolis native Dan Wakefield has written a spiritual memoir entitled *How Do We Know When It's God?* In that book, Wakefield talks about the mental and physical anguish he sometimes experiences when he's in the midst of making a major decision, and he has determined that, when that happens, it's not what God wants him to do. He says that the times he goes forward anyway, fortified with the advice and reassurance of so-called experts, he brings pain and suffering on himself and others.

Instead, he urges his readers to learn to trust our own instincts and to trust the God within us, and he likens it to the retreats he leads in the Yucatan, where the participants are asked to experience the river in the ecosystem in which they find themselves. The way to do that is to get in the water and simply lean back, and allow the current to carry you. He said that inevitably as he floats along, he finds himself thinking, "This is what trust is like; this is what it would feel like to really live in faith."

I think he's right, and I hope you do, too.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.