Did you know that there about 1.1 million charities in this country? That’s thousands in every county, and the number keeps growing. 501.c non-profit organizations employee more than 13 million people, and have lots more volunteers than that. They collect over $1.5 trillion each year in revenues and account for about 10% of the economic life of this country. Almost all of our lives are directly affected by the charitable sector: as employees, as volunteers, as donors, or as customers and clients. Federal, state, and local governments provide about $500 billion in revenues to them. +++ The charitable sector is involved in education, global health services, shelter for the homeless, preservation of public and private land, athletics, arts and culture, worship, and some of our most important scientific research. +++ In his book, *With Charity for All: Why Charities Are Failing and a Better Way to Give*, Ken Stern argues that charities keep working harder and harder but have little accountability and oversight. They also often lack evidence of effectiveness – or even measures to *gauge* effectiveness. And, lots of charities get so bogged down in their own infrastructure and logistics that they become less and less effective at achieving their core mission. +++ *Private corporations* have to watch market signals, respond when things change, and go out of business when they fail. But once a nonprofit gets formed (including churches), it often just keeps plugging along year after year – even when it loses focus – even when its *busyness* fails to achieve its mission.

Ken Stern gives the example of the American Red Cross, which was criticized after 9/11 2001 for failing to respond effectively. Personnel and resources were not adequately deployed; blood and relief supplies were not moved quickly enough from place to place. In fact, on September 12, the president of the Red Cross realized that *no* volunteers or supplies had even *gone* to the Pentagon, which is close to the Red Cross national headquarters: – no specialized teams,… no emergency response vehicles,… not even cots or food for the firefighters. The *collection* apparatus worked perfectly, though:: more than $543 million was donated to the Red Cross for 9/11 relief – far more than they could reasonably spend for the services they provided. This turned into a scandal, with the Congress and public demanding accountability and more effective infrastructure. +++ So they got *busy* – they worked *hard* – *busy, busy, busy*. +++ Then 4 years later, in August 2005, the Red Cross got a chance to redeem itself, as Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on New Orleans. Before the storm ever hit, they got *busy*. *Busy* – activating formal contingency plans, *busy* opening shelters, *busy* shipping in thousands of meals and bottles of water. They drafted volunteers and pre-positioned supplies… Now, this huge organizational effort was coordinated “top-down” from the highest levels at their Washington headquarters. *Surely* with their most senior officials calling the shots moment-by-moment, they could handle whatever might get thrown at them. But when the hurricane came ashore, floodwaters rose – isolating entire communities and separating supplies from the people who needed them. And communications were lost in many areas. The Red Cross’s top-heavy structure faltered, and the entire operation became chaotic. Again – they raised lots of money very quickly – they had that process all figured out – but they couldn’t use the money effectively. +++ Stern points out that efficient for-profit companies like Walmart brought more relief to Katrina victims than the Red Cross. Walmart had tweaked its processes over the years, responding to the needs of isolated communities. Walmart wasn’t just *BUSY* – it was listening, changing, and improving. It had expertise in supply-chain management to move the right goods to the right places, and it had deep local knowledge from its operations in almost every affected community… So, instead of the Red Cross, *Walmart* was held up as a hero of Katrina. Sheriff Harry Lee of Jefferson Parish said, “If the American government would have responded like Walmart, we wouldn’t be in this crises.” Once again, the *busyness* of running the organization – making lists and plans, managing a complicated top-heavy structure, *distracted the Red Cross from its most important work*. +++ So… back to the drawing board, once again. Reorganize. Revised mission statements. They worked hard – they were *busy, busy, busy again*. Ready for *anything*, this time… +++ +++ +++ 5 more years pass. +++ 2010. Soon after the terrible earthquake in Haiti, the Red Cross raised more than $1 billion for relief. But they were not able to spend that much money to really address problems on the ground. The country’s infrastructure was so damaged that logistics for supplying aid were a huge challenge. So… two years *after* the earthquake, Stern writes, while Haitians were thirsty and starving in tent cities, the Red Cross was still sitting on more than $150 million in unspent and unallocated donations, due to inefficiencies in their supply chain, and their inability to move supplies like clean water, food, and building
supplies to areas that needed it most. +++ And once again – “Lessons were learned,” – “We know what went wrong,” – “We’ll do better next time,” – and they got busy, busy, busy.

Now, I’m not picking on the Red Cross, it just happens to be an example that Ken Stern went into detail with in his book. And, it’s not a matter of questioning motives, either, is it? I mean, so many non-profit organizations are set up with the best of intentions: to clean up the oceans,… to bring water to villages in Africa,… to provide internet service to poor communities and schools,… to save the world’s rainforests,… and the list goes on. But in many cases, years after starting the mission – after setting up their offices, hiring a staff, and collecting lots of money – the actual goal they set out to achieve is no closer to being accomplished. They are BUSY – they are working really hard – … with emails to be read and written, meetings to go to, payroll to meet, donors to be schmoozed, departments to be managed. But somewhere along the way, that very busyness itself distracts them from the simplicity of their original vision – from the truth of their inspiration. They are too busy with tasks to ask themselves the simple question:: “Am I doing what I was called to do? Am I still really listening to those I was called to serve?”

I think a lot of that is going on in today’s gospel lesson. Martha is hard at work. She’s busy, busy, busy. Martha seems to be the head of the household. She welcomes Jesus into her home. But, as soon as he gets there, she is distracted by her many tasks. +++ To be fair, I think most of us sometimes do the same thing. If people are coming over – maybe for a dinner party – and you aren’t ready when your guests start to arrive… I know I tend to keep rushing around, trying to make everything perfect, doing things I meant to do an hour ago. It’s hard to focus your guests, isn’t it:: hard to slow down,… call a time out,… let things go – and start interacting – start listening? … Martha is so busy – so distracted – that she complains to Jesus about it:: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself!? Tell her then to help me.” +++ It’s interesting that she goes to Jesus to complain, isn’t it? Like it’s the guest’s fault that there’s so much to do and she doesn’t have the help she needs… “Don’t you care, Jesus?!”… But Jesus answers her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is a need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” +++ “Mary has taken the better part”… sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to what he is saying. +++ And suddenly, all those little tasks are no longer the priority. +++ Martha is so busy serving Jesus that she forgets to be his disciple. Like so many charities whose hearts are in the right place – Martha’s busyness keeps her from focusing on what is really important::: Jesus Christ is here among you – and he won’t be around much longer – his on his way to Jerusalem and won’t be coming back this way. +++ +++ +++ Martha is so convinced of the urgency of her work that she tries to pull Mary back from the Lord’s feet to help her. +++ But Mary has taken the better part. She has taken the posture of a disciple –: at Christ’s feet. Two chapters ago, after Jesus had freed the crazed man from demons, the people from the countryside came to see what had happened, and “found that man sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.” Sitting at the feet of Jesus – and listening – just like Mary is now – oblivious to everything else going on around her.

But let’s keep all of this in context. Luke isn’t telling us that our lives should just be spent in contemplation at the feet of Jesus instead of in action. We are called to too much important work for that. Luke places this alongside the Parable of the Good Samaritan for a reason. Last week, we encountered a lawyer who listened to Jesus, remembered the Hebrew Laws to love God and love your neighbor – and he figured out that thoughtful, loving, actions determine who our neighbors are. Then, we encountered the Samaritan… Unlike the Priest and the Levite, he wasn’t so focused on his own destination. – The Samaritan paid attention – he changed course – he acted in love – and he saved the man’s life. The Samaritan is an example of what it means to be a neighbor. +++ Just thought without action isn’t good enough – just paying attention – just noticing – doesn’t help anyone. +++ But now, in the home of Martha and Mary, we are warned of the other extreme. Just action – without continuing to pay attention to Christ – without sitting at his feet and listening to what he is saying – just action isn’t good enough, either. +++ Together, Mary and the Samaritan teach us that discipleship calls us to love our neighbor while we continue loving God. Serving our fellow people while … at the same time … discerning the voice of Christ – and the work of the Holy Spirit – in our lives. +++ DOING WITHOUT LISTENING is just busyness that achieves nothing. LISTENING WITHOUT DOING can never accomplish anything. As disciples of
Jesus Christ, **we are called ACT and to LISTEN at the feet of Christ, at the same time – in fact, to do so ALL the time.** We are called to change course if necessary, to tweak our processes, to evaluate our plans.

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That’s what Amos warns Israel about in our Old Testament reading. **They’ve stopped listening** to the voice of God among them. They’ve strayed so far from the Lord’s plan for them that they are no longer the people God wants them to be. They “trample the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.” They cheat and lie in their business dealings. And God has taken notice. +++

It seems like such an easy line to cross without realizing it, though, doesn’t it? **To be so busy “serving God” that somewhere along the line, you forget to sit at the feet of Christ…** You stop listening… Start doing things your own way… Then mission creep sets in, a gradual shift in objectives away from the original plan… And you end up… way over **THERE** somewhere – far from where you should be. +++ +++ Martha worked hard like those charities work hard – **busy** +++ – with the dishes +++ – with the tablecloth+++ – with organization – with meetings – with email – with fundraising…, +++ +++ while she ignored her divine guest… while the oceans aren’t getting cleaned… while the villages in Africa still need their water… while poor communities and schools still need internet service… while the world’s rainforests continue to disappear. +++ Or **busy,** like the Red Cross has been so busy – always trying to improve – always promising to do better next time – **then working so hard… just to stay the same.** +++ BUSY, busy, busy… +++ – while Christ sits among us +++ and gently calls us to **choose the better part,** …to sit at his feet and listen to what he is saying… – perhaps listen to how he is calling us **to change.** +++

What lessons does this message offer **us** this morning? As a church – I think the gospel confronts us to **listen at the feet of Christ** – listen to the tough questions that the Holy Spirit wants to help us answer:: Are we sometimes so busy running a nonprofit organization that we overlook Christ right before our eyes? Where is our next generation of leaders? What are we doing to prepare them for leadership – to “BE” church for younger adults – for the parents of our Sunday School children and youth? … +++ Are our children getting the rich balance of worship and education that prepares them for lifelong discipleship? … +++ Are we plugged into the **needy** in our community – the lonely – the sick – not just with our checkbooks, but **with our hands and feet?** +++ Are we thinking about demographics and planning how to ensure this church is strong and these pews aren’t empty in 10 years – or in 50 years? … What **other** questions should we be asking? +++ And, maybe the answers are all **YES** – maybe we are where we need to be with **all** of these things – but the gospel challenges us to constantly ask and answer such questions. +++ +++ +++ But that was all about the church. What about **you?** Do you sometimes get so busy, like a hamster on a running wheel, that you feel like you’ve stopped making progress? So busy with tasks – with repetition – with habit – that you sometimes think there must be more to life than this? +++ Well, THERE IS! +++ Christ is calling you to **choose the better part,** Come to his feet. Remember how to listen to his voice – then do what he says. – Love God – Love Your Neighbor – Love the Church – Make a difference – and be the person God wants you to be.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.