



First United Church of Oak Park

Nerds for Jesus

Luke 10:38-42

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Are you familiar with the author John Green? He writes YA, young adult fiction; his most well-known book is *A Fault in Our Stars*. Old and young adults alike love his work, which often features protagonists who don't fit in. His main characters are never the popular kids in school; they are not the football stars, the cheerleaders, the class presidents. They are, instead, the odd ones out.

John Green knows what it's like to be the odd one out, and you can discover that for yourself by watching the blog that he and his brother, Hank, produce.¹ VlogBrothers was an experiment they began over 10 years ago as a way of staying in touch with each other long distance, and it took off on YouTube. Now they are something of a sensation. Their most devoted followers are those of us who often feel odd, or different, or goofy. The Green brothers market themselves to self-proclaimed nerds.

John and Hank Green love nerds. They love people who are, in John Green's words, "unironically enthusiastic about stuff." Nerds, he says, are the folks who allow themselves "to love stuff, like jump up and down in the chair, can't control yourself love."² Nerds love things like comic books. Harry Potter. Star Wars. Jane Austen. You name it. You can be a nerd about anything. And, as long as it doesn't hurt anybody, John and Hank Green are OK with that. They love nerds. Why? Because they are nerds. As their blog has evolved, their commitment to supporting and encouraging other nerds has grown.³

I think that the text before us this morning is about being a nerd. Mary is a nerd for Jesus. She is over the top about being with him. She can't get enough of his presence. She is "unironically enthusiastic" about him, and she sits at his feet. Jesus is apparently OK with that.

Mary is a nerd for Jesus.

We are more comfortable with some passions and the nerdiness that accompanies it than we are with others. If you are a bit uncomfortable with the idea of being a nerd for Jesus you are in good company. In general, Protestants of our ilk – Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and other progressive Christians – are not the least bit comfortable with Jesus nerdiness. There is a long history to that.⁴

¹Here's an example of Vlogbrothers. In it you will hear John Green define the term "nerds." *Harry Potter Nerds Win at Life*. John Green. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMweXVWB918>

²Ibid.

³See www.nerdfighteria.com

⁴What follows is a very generalized overview of 200+ years of Protestant history in the U.S. Others might dispute my narrative, which is fine. Like any narrative that captures this much history in a few paragraphs, it omits a lot. It also emphasizes some little tidbits over others; this suits the sermon but it hardly does justice to our rich, fascinating history as Protestants in the U.S.

In the wake of the Bill of Rights and the disestablishment of state religion, religious leaders in our tradition, led by the Congregationalists, decided if they could not embed religion in the state, they would figure out how to embed religion in their culture. And they devised all sorts of ways to do that.

They established public schools, where they taught curriculum that was laden with thinly veiled Protestant theology. Ministers had regular columns in local newspapers. They started institutions like the YMCA. They opened up colleges and seminaries. They wrote and published literature; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* comes to mind. A few entrepreneurial Seventh Day Adventists and Methodists started businesses, some of which still survive, like Kellogg and Post cereals and Welch's Grape Juice. We are indebted to these zealous and imaginative Protestants who dotted the countryside with institutions that made such positive contributions to their communities.

Along the way, these good Protestants blurred the lines between secular and sacred. As they did that, they found ways to express their faith in ways that do not call attention to themselves. We are their heirs and we learned what they taught us. We rarely wear our faith on our sleeves, or our T shirts, or our bumper stickers.

Because of this long history, it is highly unlikely that you will find many Jesus nerds in our midst. It's just not how we do things. In fact, many of us become a little uncomfortable with people who talk a lot about loving Jesus. Consequently, many of us are, I think, a bit more comfortable with Martha than we are with Mary.

Mary is such a nerd for Jesus. She's over the top. She loves Jesus so much, she is so enthusiastic about being close to him, that she turns aside from her conventional duties. In John Green's words, she's "unironically enthusiastic" for him.

Martha loves Jesus, too, but she's set up to be the literary foil in this story. What's wrong with the way Martha's acting?

I went to seminary in the early 1970s, just when women were starting to enter Protestant ministry in greater numbers. In those early days, I heard lots of sermons preached on this text, sermons that argued for women's presence in church leadership and disparaged kitchen work. That disparagement was both intentional and unintentional, but whatever the intention, these sermons kind of dissed the work of hospitality. I see now that they got it wrong. Doing hospitality is not the problem in this text.

The theme of hospitality runs through the whole of Luke 10 in a positive way. The chapter opens with Jesus sending out the 70 into the towns of Galilee. Jesus tells the disciples to take nothing with them – no wallets, no purses, no backpacks – they are to go into the towns and see if people will be hospitable to them. To those who are hospitable, Jesus tells the disciples to offer healing and peace. If some householders refuse to offer hospitality, Jesus tells the disciples to leave those homes, to shake the dust off their feet and not turn back. The interaction of the gospel with the world hinges on the hospitality of strangers in this opening scenario: the hospitality of people who open their homes to the disciples and the hospitality of disciples who bring peace and healing.

We find another narrative in Luke 10 that hinges on hospitality, in the story told right before today's text: the parable of the good Samaritan. This parable tells of the hospitality of the Samaritan who offers care, and the hospitality of the innkeeper who agrees to do as the Samaritan asks. Remembering that our English words "hospice" and "hospital" are derivatives of the word hospitality help us understand what a broad concept this can be. Hospitality is a key biblical concept that we find in Old and New Testament alike.

That Martha offers hospitality to Jesus matters. In doing this, Martha makes space for the gospel; she welcomes Jesus and the power of the Spirit into her home. She is doing exactly what Jesus hopes people will do.

So what's the problem? The problem is not that Martha offers hospitality. I suspect the problem is that Martha is overdoing things. She is "anxious and troubled." She probably wants things to be just perfect for Jesus. Perhaps you've been in that situation. Somebody's coming to your house for dinner, and you don't want to make it just nice, you want to make it better than nice. Extra special.

Here's the tension of the text. On the one hand we have someone paying zealous attention to hospitality, so zealous that it has morphed into anxiety and tension, which sometimes happens. On the other hand, we have somebody who knows how to take joy in being with Jesus and who is unabashedly enthusiastic about being around him. Mary is having a moment of Christian mindfulness. She is not worried about impressing Jesus with her latest recipe. She's not worried about the symmetry of the flower arrangement. She simply wants to be with him, and she wants to let him know how much she loves him.

Jesus recognizes the beauty of that. Like John and Hank Green, he sees through the geekiness of her unironic enthusiasm, and appreciates the simple, honest joy of the love that Mary has for him.

Loving Jesus is at the very center of the Christian faith. People in our tradition have mastered the art of sharing that love in a secular context, and that's well and good. But many of us could learn something from Mary. Mary has a deep, enthusiastic love for Jesus. And she is completely comfortable sharing her love for him in a kind of nerdy way. That nerdy enthusiasm allows her to connect with Jesus in a way that Martha can't. I'm envious of that. How Mary loves Jesus is beautiful, and bold, and courageous. She may be a nerd, but she is also a model for every believer.

Amen.