

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

## COMPANY IS COMING

At my house we also worry about being a good host or hostess. If we're going to have company we want to make sure that the house is clean, the linens are fresh, and the food is ready to be prepared.

If we find out that someone is coming on short notice, our house becomes a flurry of activity. Tempers often run short, and the anxiety of anticipation fills the air.

But, in the ancient world, hospitality was even more important than it is today. It was a sacred duty. And since, in our lesson for today, the guest was Jesus that made the visit even more significant.

Many years ago President Ronald Reagan decided to worship in a very small church at the last minute. Only church members could attend that particular service, and the media was surprised by the sudden visit.

I have often wondered how that small church felt about having the President of the United States visit.

Can't you just see the members rushing around at the last minute to clean the building and prepare for this auspicious visit? I wonder if the pastor made some last minute adjustments to his sermon?

I think the same sort of frenzy was in the air when Martha invited Jesus to her home. The Bible doesn't say what tasks Martha was doing. But, we can guess.

We know from other biblical passages that it was customary to wash a guest's dusty feet and give them oil for their hair. Maybe Martha did this while she was also busy preparing a meal for Jesus and his disciples.

There was a lot to do! And Martha was doing it all because her sister Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to his every word.

## PROJECTION VERSUS INTERPRETATION

Now let me warn you about a common pitfall when it comes to biblical interpretation. The Bible is not a Rorschach test! Projecting our feelings and experiences on the text is not an accepted method of interpretation.

And that's especially tempting with this passage.

Many of us can remember times when we were like Martha, struggling to do what needed to be done while our lazy brother or sister was not helping at all. When we read the Scripture through the lens of those experiences we side with Martha.

In fact we probably have quite a bit of sympathy for what Martha said to Jesus. "Don't you care, Jesus that I have to bear this burden by myself? Tell my sister to help me!"

And Jesus' response, at first blush, seems almost condescending. He says, "Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things. Chill out. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her."

And we want to reply, "Yes, Jesus, Mary may have chosen the better part, but if you want to eat supper tonight, you better give Martha some help!"

But, that's reading the Scripture through the lens of our experience. How might we view this passage differently if we began not with our own experience but with its context in the gospel of Luke?

## ON THE WAY TO JERUSALEM

You may remember that a few weeks back we noted the importance of Luke 9:51. In that passage we read that Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem.

In Luke's narrative from this point on all the action takes place under the shadow of the cross and the hope of the resurrection.

Jesus refused to be distracted from that all-important journey to Jerusalem. You'll recall that he warned his disciples that this would not be an easy journey.

They had to give up the old way of life in order to follow. They had to put their hand to the plow and not look back. Even important family obligations took a back seat when it came to this journey to Jerusalem.

And the same is true in this situation.

This was not a normal visit. This was a stop on the way to Jerusalem. And this was no time to be distracted, even with duties that were important and necessary.

Martha was right to serve and provide hospitality to her guests. Jesus commended this kind of service many times. In fact the passage that precedes this one, the parable of the Compassionate Samaritan, teaches that very lesson.

It's not enough to know what God requires. You have to do what faith requires. But, there needs to be a balance between hearing the Word and doing the Word.

This week the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. The problem with Martha is not her serving. The problem with Martha is that she is worried and distracted.

### WORRIED AND DISTRACTED

The word translated "distracted" has the connotation of being pulled or dragged in different directions.

Mary's worried and distracted state does not leave her room for the most important aspect of hospitality. She does not pay attention to her guest. She does not pay attention to Jesus.

In fact Mary breaks all the rules of hospitality by trying to shame her sister in front of her guest and asking that guest to intervene in a family squabble. She even goes so far as to accuse Jesus of not caring about her situation.

Worry and distraction prevent Martha from being truly present with Jesus. She drives a wedge between herself and her sister. She drives a wedge between herself and Jesus.

Jesus tells her that she missed out on the one thing needed. And what is that one thing? It is a willingness to listen to your guest.

I think that we can understand this to be an invitation instead of a rebuke.

Jesus is inviting Martha to also sit at his feet and hear his words. Jesus is telling Martha that she is valued not for what she does or for how much she does. She is valued for who she is.

In this case the tables are turned. The guest shows hospitality toward the host and invites her to be a part of the conversation.

In the ancient world women were not allowed to be a part of the conversation. But, in Jesus' world that changed. Women and men were valued members of the kingdom.

Sometimes the thing that keeps us from doing meaningful ministry is that we are worried and distracted by many things. We live in a culture where schedules are hectic and the pursuit of productivity is relentless.

Many people measure their worth by how busy they are and how well they meet the expectations of others.

We also are distracted by technology. Next time you go in a restaurant, look at how many people are on their cell phones, twittering away while on a date with their friend or spouse!

Technology may have given us more ways to be worried and distracted by many things. But, the words of Jesus are still true. One thing is necessary, and it is not found on Facebook!

Do you feel like Martha? Are you worried and distracted, pulled in many directions by a world that seems out of control? It's time to simplify your life. Come sit at the feet of Jesus.

Do you remember the words Jesus had for a worried and anxious generation? Jesus said, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (Luke 12:25)

The answer of course is "no". Worry cannot add a single hour to our life. (In fact, worry very well may take time away from our life.)

We know that. We know that worry does no good. We know that many of the things we worry about are not important in the larger scheme of things.

But, it's really hard to quiet that anxious voice in our head. It's really hard to end our compulsive busyness in favor of listening to a more important voice.

## THE MAIN COURSE

I've found that this seemingly innocent little passage about Martha and Mary can be quite controversial. We understand Martha and her busyness. We understand her motives. We know what it means to work hard to provide for our families. We want to serve our neighbors. We want to serve the Lord.

And where would the church be without all the "Marthas" of the world? We need those faithful people who use their gifts of hospitality and service to make the church a place of welcome and warmth. Serving others in the name of Jesus is important.

But, it's not the whole story.

In Eugene H. Peterson's *The Message*, Jesus says: "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it -- it's the main course, and won't be taken from her."

I like that dynamic translation of the text. Listening to Jesus is the main course of life's feast. It doesn't mean that listening is better than doing. Instead, it suggests there needs to be a sense of balance.

In the business world they talk about keeping the “main thing the main thing.” I think Jesus is saying something similar. What is the main thing, the main course in the Christian feast?

The words of Jesus are the main course.

In the final analysis neither Martha nor Mary are the hosts at this banquet. Jesus is the host, and he spreads the word like a banquet to nourish and strengthen us.

If our activities leave us no time to be still and hear the Lord’s voice, then we’re too busy.

And we will soon lose the ability to serve.

We will become anxious and troubled. We will end up with a kind of service that is empty of love and joy. We will become resentful of those who do not help us.

Listening and doing are both vital parts of the Christian life just as inhaling and exhaling are vital to breathing. Yet quite often we forget to breathe deeply.

And in the same way, trying to serve without being nourished by the words of Jesus is like expecting good fruit to grow from a tree that has been uprooted.

Like so many of the stories in the Bible we don’t know how this one ends. We don’t know the rest of the story.

We don’t know whether Mary and Martha were reconciled. We don’t know if Martha was finally able to give her full attention to Jesus.

Sometimes I wish the gospel writers would go ahead and tell us the rest of the story.

But, when you think about it, the important thing for us is not so much what Martha and Mary did in response to the words of Jesus. The important thing is what we do.

Jesus invites us, we who are worried and distracted by many things to sit and rest in his presence. Jesus invites us to hear his words of grace and truth.

Jesus reminds us that we are loved with no strings attached. We are God’s children. And it is this message that renews our faith and gives us the strength to serve in his name.

Someone once said, “If you don’t have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can’t get up every day to work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down.”

I have met many people who have been beaten down by a life of service. I have met many people like Martha who have begun to find their service and work in the church to be distracting and anxiety provoking.

Instead of feeling happy about what they do, they feel angry. They wonder out loud why those “new people” aren’t as committed.

Serving is no longer a blessing. Serving keeps them from hearing the words of Jesus.

Sometimes people do too much.

Sometimes people out of a sense of duty or guilt or an attempt to earn their own salvation always say “yes” when someone asks them to serve. And then they resent the service.

If someone comes to me and says that they’re worn out by their service in the church, I never try to cajole them into serving more and more ... even though I might think that church could use the service.

Instead, I try to help them refocus their energy and regain their vision. I ask them, “When was serving a less onerous task? When did you feel fulfilled spiritually? When did that change?”

Sometimes they can’t answer those questions. Sometimes they are so burned out by the service that they want to “retire” permanently. Sometimes church members and ministers even leave the church because service becomes a burden instead of a joy.

## GRACIOUS WORDS

And yet there are others who serve constantly, and yet never seem to tire of their service. What makes the difference? It’s not how much we do that makes a difference. It’s our reason for service that makes all the difference.

So what should our motive for service be? Are we trying to serve enough so that God will love us more? Are we serving because if we don’t do it no one else will? Are we trying to impress others?

If you answered yes to any of those things, you have scored high on the potential burn out scale. Those reasons for serving aren’t good enough. Those reasons can make anxious and distract us from what we really need to be doing. Those reasons for serving can even prevent us from hearing the words of Jesus.

So what is the right reason for serving? There is only one and that reason is gratitude. We sometimes call it grace. And we hear the words of grace from Jesus.

Among the ancient Greeks, when the races were run each contestant carried a torch. The winner of the race was not the person who crossed the finish line first. The winner was the one who crossed finish line in the least time with his torch still burning.

Many of us have had a hard time keeping the flame burning. In our effort to rush and win the race, we have somehow forgotten the object of the game.

Our accomplishments don't bring us the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment that we thought that would. Sometimes we get everything we thought we wanted, and yet it isn't enough.

All of us from time to time need to re-evaluate and refocus. Life can become a compulsive habit instead of a joyful adventure.

This passage teaches us that Jesus does not want us to serve in this way.

Jesus wants us to hear a Word of grace so joyous and amazing that our whole perspective on the world changes. Jesus wants us to choose the better way.

E. Stanley Jones once said, "Yourself on you own hands is a problem and a pain; yourself in the hands of God is a possibility and a power."

Let us once again sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his gracious words.

Amen.

### Prayer

Father,

We give you thanks that the Spirit of Christ still comes to our homes,  
Teaching us about his love and enabling us to live as he would have us live.

May we take the time to sit and listen for his voice.  
Give us a sense of perspective.  
Let us find our center and our anchor in your presence.

We pray for those who like Martha are worried and upset by many things.  
All of us are like this at least some of the time.  
We fail to give thanks for our blessings.  
And we give too much time and effort to activities that are not all that important.

Forgive our impatience and our fearful lack of faith.  
Help us bring what we have and give it all to you, trusting that you will make it  
enough.

Help us invite Jesus into our homes and into our lives that we may sit at his feet and  
hear his word of salvation.

We seek to pray and live as he taught us saying ....  
(The Lord's Prayer)