

Luke 10:38-42

Distracted

Mary and Martha. Mary the one who has been portrayed as the sister who got it right as she sat listening to Jesus and Martha as the one who got it wrong because she was so busy taking care of guests. Hardly seems fair. Martha was doing exactly what would be expected of a woman with guests in her own time and in her household and also in ours. To this day, women are often the ones who prepare the meals and host guests, though thankfully things have changed considerably and those tasks are now often shared with others in the household.

It has also been easy to look at Mary and think that she was not helpful at all and Martha had every reason to be frustrated and angry. And to be sure, a household needs people who are willing to serve each other and to work together, especially when there are guests. There was really nothing unrealistic or unreasonable about Martha's need for help. What became the struggle for Martha was that she was so focused on what needed to be done that she missed really appreciating who was her guest. She was distracted by the tasks at hand.

You can tell where Martha's mind was. She demanded that Jesus make Mary help her as she says to him, "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand." (10:40). Martha is frustrated, as I think many of us would be. We have all likely had an experience where it felt like we were left holding the bag, so to speak, as others went on their merry way, not even recognizing the work or life demands we carry and the stress we are under.

It may be preparing for guests; it may be the number of doctors appointments we have on the calendar and illness we are managing. We may be a lone caregiver or feel like the lone caregiver for an elderly or unwell person. We get angry when we have no one to help with the burden or relieve us of the burden. That can be especially frustrating when there are siblings we think could help and they just don't. Another example would be as a student. How many times in group work does the group pick up the slack of the one who doesn't seem to pull their weight, doesn't research or show up, and yet gets the same mark as all the rest in their group? That never seems fair, but the workers do the work because they don't want their grades to suffer.

And what of the company project? Another place where team work is important, and yet only a few do the work. It can feel the same in a service organization or even in churches where it seems the same people roll up their sleeves and get the work done and others just show up for worship on Sundays or the fun activities expecting the

church or organization to be there for them while never doing anything to make sure that the organization or church can do the work it is called to.

My point is, that Martha's are important. People working together to get a job done is necessary. Things do not function without people being willing to pull together and share the load. So, when Jesus responds to Martha with the words, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing." (10:41) He is not rebuking her or chastising her. Jesus knows the work needs to be done. Throughout the scriptures, serving others and getting the work done is an important part of participating in the work of God.

We hear it in the story of Abraham entertaining guests in Genesis 18 (verses 1-8) where he gets people busy preparing and serving a meal to three men who arrived at his camp. We hear it in Acts 6 (verses 1-7) where there was a need to care for the widows who have nothing and so the community of disciples chose from among them those whose work it was to make sure that people were taken care of, provided for. There are numerous stories of hospitality provided to others in scripture as this was and is an important and necessary task. If we are to show care, love, compassion, and work toward a just society, then service to others is a given.

So, what is Jesus getting at in this moment if he is not dismissing the necessary work that Martha is doing?

As usual, context is helpful. At this point in Luke's gospel Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. In other words, he is headed to the cross, his time with people as Jesus in the flesh is running short. The end date is in sight. Of course, the people around Jesus are blissfully unaware of the future event of the cross, but Jesus is well aware of what is going to happen. He has tried to warn those he is with, but though they hear the words, they just cannot get their minds around the fact that this man, who they view as the Messiah, is not going to take Jerusalem by storm, but rather will die the death of a criminal.

When Jesus speaks to Martha about Mary and how Mary has chosen the one thing that is essential, it is the main course, the main event, and choosing as she has, Jesus will not stop her from sitting at his feet to listen and learn, he is, in effect saying, this in the context, he will not be with them long. This is the time to stop doing and just be still for a time.

There will be time for work, for preparing and for serving, but as Jesus is speaking and teaching, while he is with them, it is a time to stop, to not be distracted by all the doing, but to sit with him. Be still for a time. Be renewed and refreshed. Both taking time to be with the Word and in the word as well as doing work, preparing and serving, all are important. Jesus is not saying choose one above the other, but he may be saying that first we need to be still, be with the Word and in the word and then go about the doing.

So, what does this mean for us as we don't have Jesus standing in the flesh before us so maybe it doesn't feel like there is the same urgency to stop and listen. Yet could it be that the principle is the same? Do we also need to stop and listen, spend time in scripture, in worship, and in prayer, in order to go out to do the work, whether it be for our families, friends, or community?

I think the answer is pretty self-evident, and yet how many of us just go about being distracted by the many things that need doing. We go to the next appointment, we clean the house, fix things in the garage, mow the lawn in the summer, and shovel snow in the winter. We get to the next project, the next deadline, the next whatever and don't even really give Jesus or God a nod.

One would think that as a minister I should be good at giving time to God, but I can be as distracted as anyone. There is the next meeting, the next sermon, the next service, the next funeral, the next...and my list goes on. Lately the list never seems to have an ending. It has been very easy to pray on the go, or read and study scripture only to get the next sermon and service prepared and done.

We all have our distractions, and they may be very good and reasonable distractions, ones that mean others are cared for, things get done for the good of others, and we like to think that all of that demonstrates our love for God. And it does! But just like Martha, we are distracted by the need to get things done. What Jesus is saying is first take time to sit and be with Jesus, whether it be in worship, in prayer, in nature, in reading the Bible. Take time to get your direction, your purpose, your energy from the well-spring of life which is God. All those other things will always be there, and we need to make time for them, but we also need to make time to be renewed, to be fed, to build the relationship between us and God. It doesn't happen on the fly. It only happens when we spend time with God, setting aside all of the to-dos and sitting, like Mary, at Jesus feet.

Relationship building takes time, effort, perseverance, and vulnerability. That is true in our human relationships and it is true of our relationship with God. Take the time. Make the time. I assure you that your life will not get busier, or harder, rather the demands of the world will become easier to bear. We may even get better at determining what God is asking us to do and be. What we endeavor to take on will be seen in light of what God is doing in the world through us. We will be more at peace, less likely to be frustrated by ourselves and others. Over time our focus will shift from what needs to be done to in whose name we do it.

May your life contain both the best of Mary and the best of Martha. Both are necessary and needed. Only, take time first to be with God in whatever way that means for you, knowing that as you grow into the relationship, those ways of being with God will also grow and change. Then go out to serve with joy, with love, with God's purposes lighting and guiding your way.

Be both a learner of the Word and a partner in God's work. In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.