

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus'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 but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:38-42

07/20/2015 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"The Work of Listening"

Rev. Amy Terhune

"Al and Betty Johnson live on a farm about 150 miles northeast of Rapid City, S.D. Not many folks live in Rapid City, and even fewer live 150 miles northeast of it. They say it isn't the end of the earth, but you can see it from there. Needless to say, there aren't a lot of stores, so whenever the Johnsons have a reason to go into the city, they keep a running list of things they need.

"A while back, Betty's mother was flying in for a visit. So Al made a list of all the things he needed to do on his way to the airport to pick up his mother-in-law.

"When he finally got home late that evening, he was so excited to tell Betty about all he had accomplished. He had gotten new tires put on the truck and found everything she wanted at the mall. He had even bought her a new dress that he couldn't wait to show her.

"But he hardly got a word out before Betty interrupted him: "Al," she demanded, "Where's Mom?" [4 ¶s from Rev. L. John Gable, <http://www.crossroadspres.org/052100.htm>. Adapted here from "Only One Thing Is Needed" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Poor Al. I feel for him, don't you? I mean, not as much as I feel for his poor mother-in-law, but still... I doubt there's anyone here today who has struggled with being distracted and sidetracked by the trivial. Which seems to be the theme of our gospel lesson this morning.

Let me set the scene briefly. This morning, we find ourselves in what we may presume is the little town of Bethany, just a few miles outside of Jerusalem. We make our way through the dusty streets to the home of three siblings—Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. We know that from the gospel of John. Luke doesn't tell us anything about Lazarus—just his two sisters. Strangely, at least for that day and age, the house, according to the text, is Martha's. How these three siblings came to be living together rather than with spouses, and how it is that Martha owns the home, is not explained. Doesn't matter, really. What we do know is that Jesus was probably a frequent guest there, that he was close to the three siblings, and that Martha's home seemed to provide a sort-of retreat-like setting where Jesus could get away from the crowds and catch his breath. In today's passage, Martha is hard at work. Jesus is there, along with his 12 disciples, and perhaps a smattering of others who supported their ministry. Martha is finding beds for everyone, and moving furniture to make room, and no doubt cooking up a big dinner to feed upwards of 16 people, and there's no pre-packaged anything from a local grocery store to make it easier. She's doing it all from scratch. Over an open fire. In Israel. It's got to be sweltering work. But without question, the hottest thing in the kitchen that evening is Martha herself.

Because while she's working away, her sister is sitting at the feet of Jesus, wholly absorbed in his teaching, basking in the warmth of his presence, and NOT helping.

I have a certain degree of sympathy for Martha. Maybe because I've been where she is. Most of us have. I've felt what I imagine she must be feeling—peevish, resentful, boorish. It's not a good feeling. My initial gut reaction is always annoyance with Mary. I'll freely admit it. If she's not being downright rude, she's at least insensitive. Of course, a first century audience in Palestine would not have seen it that way. They would not have called her insensitive or rude. They'd have called her scandalous, reprehensible. A woman? Sitting at the feet of great rabbi? Learning? We'd call such an attitude completely misogynistic, but that is how it was back then. There's even a passage in the Mishnah, which is an ancient commentary on Torah written at approximately the same time as the New Testament, which states that it's better the words of Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman. Which burns my biscuits, let me tell you!

But that's not the worst of it. Carl Schenck explains that, "...in the Middle East, in ancient times, there was an unbreakable law of hospitality. When you brought someone into your home or into your tent, you had a moral obligation to provide for them whatever their needs might be, even to the point of depriving yourself... Martha was busy doing what was expected, not just out of hospitality in the superficial sense; she was doing what was demanded of her by one of the deepest and most profound and most binding customs of her era." [from Carl L. Schenck, "Many Anxieties – One Need"; as used in "Let Your Soul Catch Up" by Maxie Dunnam, www.Sermons.com.] Mary, on the other hand, seems to have forgotten all about hospitality, allowing her guest to minister to her instead of the other way around.

And so, Martha sort of melts down, I guess you'd say. The text tells us she is upset over all the work she must do, but I get the sense that it isn't the work itself that's got her frothing at the mouth. It's doing it alone that gets her goat. But rather than discreetly approaching her sister with a quiet, "Psst: I need your help for a few minutes", she goes to Jesus. A psychologist might define her behavior as passive aggressive and would almost certainly note the attempts at triangulation going on—that's where one attempts to involve a third party in a dispute so as to shame the other. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!" Her words are accusatory rather than appealing, and they betray the feelings prickling in her soul. Yet, Jesus does not seem particularly concerned, and we are left wondering: does he? Does he care? "Martha, Martha," he says, which sounds so patronizing to my ears. "You are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Which sounds like a rebuke, feels like a rebuke, and is virtually always preached on as a rebuke. But I'm not sure we should take it that way. After all, it's not like Jesus has no appreciation for work. If you'll remember, it was just last week that Jesus told a story about a man beaten by robbers and left for dead, and the hero of the story were not the two that passed by in all their purity, but the one who rolled up his sleeves and got busy treating injuries and binding up wounds. And lest we forget, it was Jesus himself who, after washing a slew of dirty feet, reminded us on the last night of his life that the Son of man came, not to be served, but to serve. All of which suggests that Jesus knows well the value of the Marthas in this world.

Many of us identify with Martha because we know we need her; because a church without any Marthas would be a frightening place to be. Max Lucado is right on target when he writes: "Every church needs a Martha. Scratch that. Every church needs a hundred Marthas. Sleeves rolled up and ready, they keep the pace for the church. Because of the Marthas, the church budgets get balanced, church buildings get repaired, and cleaned babies get bounced on loving knees in the nursery. You don't appreciate Marthas until one of them is missing and all the Marys of the church start scrambling

to find the keys to lock doors, turn off the lights and shut down the fans." [from Max Lucado, *A Gentle Thunder*, Word Publishing, 1995, page 127.]

But let's consider all this from another perspective. "Remember that Jesus was on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem...his last visit to Jerusalem...his dying visit to Jerusalem. Does he know that this is his "dying visit?" It would seem that he senses it. Which certainly changes his demeanor. And which certainly changes the tone of his encounters. After all, don't most people suspend normal routines at such moments? I certainly think they do.

"It calls to mind an old World War II song recorded by the Hoosier Hotshots back in the 1940s. The song depicts a father who hears a doorbell and opens the door to greet the surprise arrival of their boy...in full uniform...home from Germany. Whereupon dad turns in the general direction of the kitchen and sings:

Leave the dishes in the sink, Ma,
Leave the dishes in the sink.
Each dirty plate will have to wait,
Tonight we're gonna celebrate,
So leave the dishes in the sink, Ma,
Leave the dishes in the sink.

[2 ¶s and song from "Stop Beating up on Martha" by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

What I mean to suggest here is that time is marching on for Jesus. And there're more important things to do than eat and clean. There's more important truth to communicate. Oh, don't miss it, Martha. Don't miss it. These things don't come around again!

I recall a day not so long ago when a woman came to speak with me about something going on in her life. She saw me sitting at my desk, working on the computer, and she said, "Oh, you're busy." Yes. I was busy. There is never a shortage of things to do in ministry, even in the summertime. There are lesson plans and book studies and Vacation Bible School and sermon series to plan for, visits to make, people to call, things I must attend to. I had several things that needed to get done, and for a half a second, I was tempted to let her walk away.

Fortunately, that little voice inside of me spoke up and reminded me that what was happening on my computer screen was never as important as what's happening in people's lives. Ministry so often happens in the interruptions, after all. So, I called her back, and she sat down, and I listened. I couldn't fix her problems, but for a few moments of our day, we entered the presence of God. And when we'd prayed together and she went on her way, the computer was still there, and the work was still waiting and what needed to get accomplished got done eventually. Sadly, there have been times when I have ignored that little voice. I wonder what I've missed—what chances to bless and be blessed.

Lord, don't you care? This is what Martha wants to know. But I think Jesus cares very much. I think Jesus wants to care for her, wants to give her something more. Just as he calmed the storm for his disciples, he wants to calm the storm for Martha. He wants to give her the gift of presence. But before he can do that, he must give her the gift of perspective.

Listen again to Martha's question: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Did you notice how many times she refers to herself in two sentences? It's revealing. Moreover, it is language I recognize because I'm guilty of the same mindset – the one that pulls me away from the center of things, the one that gives into a fallacy that it all depends on me. And I get stressed out when I know I can't pull my own weight; that I'm not good enough, strong enough, wise enough, savvy enough, whatever it may be. I think maybe Martha is feeling the same thing. I think she

really does care about Jesus, wants things to be just right for him, wants everything to go smoothly, and there's her sister, just soaking it all in instead of sharing the load to ensure its perfect.

But the thing is – and this always troubles Methodists who have been trained to strive for perfection – Jesus doesn't need perfect logistics. Just perfect love, true devotion. Jesus would never say that it's okay to be idle when there's work that needs doing, or that the quiet, contemplative life beats out the life of service in some kind of spiritual contest. Or even that feeding oneself and one's soul is a legitimate excuse for not feeding others when they're truly hungry. We dare not twist this to say something it doesn't; to give us an excuse to not serve. But I think what Jesus would say is that there's a time and place to recognize that it's not about my needs, my work, my call or my agenda, but rather, it's about his.

Several years back, the keynote speaker at a White House Prayer Breakfast during the George W. Bush Administration was Bono, the lead singer of U2, who was partnering with Bush at the time to combat AIDS in Africa and to work at reducing third world national debt. At that Prayer Breakfast, Bono told about a conversation he had with Bishop Desmond Tutu. Bono explained:

"In countless ways, large and small, I was always seeking the Lord's blessing. I was saying, you know, I have a new song, look after it... I have a family, please look after them... I have this crazy idea...

"And this wise man said: stop. He said: stop asking God to bless what you're doing. Get involved in what God is doing—because it's already blessed."

"Get involved in what God is doing. What a radical idea! [3 ¶s adapted from "A New Calling" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Mary was interested in what God was doing, teaching, offering. She let herself be drawn in. She listened for the movement of the Spirit. Maybe the problem isn't Martha's desire to serve, but her inability to listen to a deeper calling; to center her service in what God is doing here and now. We desperately need our Martha. We need you more than ever! Listen. Pay attention. Get involved in what God is doing.

"Urban legend has it (*no this is not a true story, but it is a good one*) that in 1990 a woman entered a Haagen-Dazs in the Kansas City Plaza for an ice-cream cone. While she was ordering another customer entered the store. She placed her order, turned and found herself staring face to face with Paul Newman. His blue eyes made her knees buckle. She finished paying and quickly walked out of the store with her heart still pounding. Gaining her composure she suddenly realized she didn't have her ice-cream cone; so she turned to go back in. At the door, she met Paul Newman who was coming out. He said to her, "Are you looking for your ice-cream cone?" Unable to utter a word, she nodded, and he informed her: "You put it in your purse with your change."

"When was the last time the presence of God made you forget what was going on around you? Made you forget the dishes? Made you forget the ball game? Made you forget the bank account? Made you forget where...you put your ice cream cone? [2 ¶s adapted from Brett Blair, illustrations for RCL Proper 11, www.Sermons.com.]

Mary let herself get lost in Christ's presence. She took it in. She gave herself that moment to connect. And Martha—hard-working, incredibly giving, deeply important, much-needed Martha—well, the text doesn't tell us how she responds to Jesus. Maybe she stormed back to the kitchen in a fit of indignation. Maybe she missed it; maybe she got stuck in little old Bethany with her eyes on the fire and the bubbling pots instead of feeling the fire of the Holy Spirit and the bubbling joy of God's presence. Or maybe not. Maybe she listened more deeply to Jesus' call and left the pots on the stove to boil over and the roast to burn. We don't know. What's clear to me is that Luke leaves the question open for you and I to respond. "Hey Martha, hey world rushing by with your busy, busy pace—I'm here. Listen. Get in on what I'm doing! I have so much to add to your life, so much to inspire your life, so much to enrich your life! Don't miss it!