

Action and Contemplation
Luke 10:38-42 Psalm 131

Returning to Luke's gospel this morning to look at an account that only Luke records:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

This is the word of the Lord!

This passage always reminds me of a recurring line from the old Laurel and Hardy show: they get into a predicament or some ridiculous situation; Oliver Hardy would say to Stan Laurel: "Well, don't just stand there, do something!"

I can hear Martha saying that to Mary: don't just sit there; do something! Except Martha tells Jesus to tell Mary to do something. Which, I guess, carries a bit more weight than just saying it directly to her.

Don't raise your hand (and guys included)... I wonder: how many of you relate to Martha? How many relate to Mary?

Me? In this particular situation I relate to Martha. In fact, I find myself *cheering* for Martha. Think of it; she's opened her home to a band of at least 13 hungry people, if not more (we read just before this in Luke that a group of 70 had just returned from their short-term mission trip, so this is likely a much larger group). Things have to get done. People have to be fed. They have needs. There is a ministry that needs to be carried on here. Luke told us a little bit earlier that Jesus has resolutely set his face toward to Jerusalem; so he's on a mission and things better not get delayed.

I might have said the same thing that Martha said, "Don't you care that I'm left to do all the work by myself?!? Tell her to help me!!! She's sitting there, and you don't seem to care." Part of me wishes Jesus had said, "You're right, Martha. How insensitive of us. Guys, Mary, get up, and let's give Martha a hand." But as we know, Jesus sees a bigger picture here.

Very likely, Martha is trying to please Jesus, which makes his response potentially all the more upsetting for her. She might expect him to applaud her for all she's doing. But instead he applauds Mary for (apparently) doing nothing but sitting there. For wasting time and just listening—which isn't really a waste of time, as we know, but sure looks like it to us who relate to Martha in this situation.

One of the things this passage affirms (which the whole Bible affirms through the variety of people who appear in it) is that there are wonderful personality differences in us all. We are fearfully and wonderfully made as David puts it in Psalm 139. And it's good that we're all so different.

At the risk of overgeneralization... some people are more inclined toward action like Martha; some are more contemplative like Mary. Some by nature like to be busy and in motion; some like to stop and smell the roses. Both are good; both are needed. The world needs *all of us*! But if there's one thing that we learn from this story, it's this: If we're a Martha type we can't say, "I'm a busy person and not a spiritual person. That listening to Jesus thing just isn't for me." We can't say that.

We also can't say, if we're a Mary type: "I'm a contemplative, quiet person, and not an active person." There are times and seasons where one or the other is needed, and necessary. And it takes some work and discipline to do the thing which doesn't come naturally to us, *when it's needed*. If you're a busy person or prone to worry/anxiety, it takes work to quiet yourself down, like Martha needs to do. If you're a Mary type there will be times when you need to discipline yourself to put into action what you're listening to and learning.

Here's a cool observation from Luke's gospel. Let's put this event in its context, and look at what comes just before it and just afterward. It's instructive that this Mary-Martha event comes on the heels of the parable of the Good Samaritan. There is a story where a guy just DID something. He didn't sit and listen, absorbing the lesson for the day by watching a beat-up guy bleed to death on the side of the road. He sprung into action. And, the short-term mission trip of the 70 came before that, when Jesus sent them out to DO things. That's what comes before.

And what follows the Mary and Martha event is Jesus' teaching on prayer; where we don't DO anything necessarily, but simply talk to God, and listen to God, and learn. Learn to trust God more and pursue a relationship with our heavenly Father who loves us and leads us.

The point of having these 3 or 4 accounts in a row is: there are times to get busy and spring into action, and there are times to be quiet and listen and learn. We need both. And we need the wisdom to know the right timing of when to listen and when to act.

Martha's challenge is that she was all work and worry. Some others' challenge is that they are all quietness and contemplation. Good, healthy discipleship includes both. Prayer & work. Active listening, and active... activity.

And, lifelong discipleship recognizes that there are Mary seasons *of life*, and there are Martha seasons *of life*. There are times or seasons of life where we are invited to be more active; and then there will be times and seasons of life when we're invited to be more reflective. Some of that comes naturally with the particular age or stage of life we're in. Some of it comes with the events and circumstances of life—which could be pleasant or painful—which invite us to slow down; or become more active.

My guess is that most of us need to learn from Mary—which is why Luke records this story; it's a perennial human proclivity to overdo things. And it's magnified for us, today, because we live in a Martha world. A world of constant doing and busyness and activity. It's somehow embedded in our theology too, as part of the protestant work ethic: God will be pleased with you if you do more. "Productivity is next to godliness" (it says somewhere in the Bible... NOT). In addition, busyness and activity is how many people get approval and self-worth. But if that method of approval-getting is followed too much, we end up being distracted and exhausted people, rather than peaceful, grounded people.

In the Mary-Martha account, Jesus says to Martha, "Mary has chosen the **better** part." Notice that Jesus did not say that Mary has chosen the **right** part, and you, Martha, have chosen the **wrong** part. He didn't say, "Why can't you be

like your sister Mary??" In a subtle way Jesus affirming Martha and the *good* that she's doing. Mostly, though, he is affirming the *better* thing that Mary is doing at that moment.

Martha's problem here is not that she's doing something bad, or wrong. Hospitality is central to the culture of the Middle East, and many places around the world. Who can blame Martha for doing what she's doing?!? She's doing a good thing, and the culturally appropriate thing. So, Jesus doesn't say "you are doing a wrong thing" or "a bad thing." What he says is, "you are *worried and distracted... by many things.*" Worried and distracted. By many things. This says more about her state of heart and mind than her activity.

The Greek word for 'worry' from our text (also translated as 'anxiety' in other places) comes from the root word "part" or "piece"—the idea being a piece of something that once belonged to the whole. So the word 'worry' suggests an image of parts and pieces, or being "pulled apart" or "pulled in different directions." Which is a good image of what worry or anxiety does, isn't it? It pulls us in many directions mentally and emotionally. Think of what your mind does when you're lying awake at night and can't sleep and all the things that take turns running through your mind...

Parts and pieces—worry/anxiety pulls us in so many directions. Or maybe even just a couple directions.

And it affects the disposition of our heart and mind. And it doesn't matter if our schedule is full or light.

We can have a full and busy schedule and still be peaceful and able to listen and learn. We can have a relatively un-busy schedule and be worried and distracted by many things. It's what's in here (heart) and here (mind) that matters. Jesus understands that, which is why he addresses the issues of worry and distraction and not the activity itself.

Worry and distraction are about our inward disposition, and not our outward activity. Jesus is not telling Martha to stop doing what she's doing; he is inviting her to lower her blood pressure—to calm and quiet her soul as David says in Psalm 131. Jesus says to her “there is need of only one thing.” So instead of parts and pieces, Jesus calls her to the “one thing.” It's a beautiful play on words, and images. To silence the many voices of distraction and worry and let his voice, and his voice only, be the one that she listens to (that one that we listen to).

Jesus' response to Martha is a compassionate response. Jesus is basically saying to Martha, “come and learn to rest your weary soul.” It reminds me of psalm 23: “He leads me beside quiet waters; he restores my soul.” This isn't a

scolding of Martha by Jesus, as some think it is. It's a compassionate invitation to quiet oneself before Jesus.

Picture Jesus compassionately saying to Martha (or to you/me): "You're way too serious and stressed about things that are good, but aren't of eternal significance right now—they're taking your attention away from what's really important in this present moment. Everything will be alright. Breathe. Come, listen to what I have to say." Jesus tells Martha that she's worried and distracted by many things. And that's really the key here. Worry and distraction.

Think of worry and distraction in terms of what fog does (we just watched a show that featured the great London fog of 1952, so I've been thinking about fog): a thick fog can obscure the daylight; it can cause confusion if you're trying to find your way. But if we think about it, fog is just a certain amount of water divided into millions of droplets; it doesn't have much substance. Yet it has the power to cause traffic jams and keep us from seeing the landscape, the bigger picture if you will.

So it is with anxiety. Our mind disperses a problem or a to-do list into many fear droplets, obscuring God's presence. We get spiritually and emotionally fogged in and we lose perspective — "worried and distracted by many things" as Jesus says.

When that begins to happen, we need to use our spiritual GPS locator and look to Jesus who sees the entire landscape, who isn't affected by the fog. We need to find a way to still and quiet ourselves; to pray... and trust... and listen. This is a simple but earnest call to be in prayer, and in God's word, listening and abiding in Jesus. When we do that consistently, we can begin to see that our worries are actually small in comparison to God's goodness and faithfulness.

Worrying magnifies a problem, but prayer magnifies God. God is huge; it's easy to forget that sometimes. And I often think that the goal of prayer is not primarily to see our problems as small, but to be reminded of how big God is. How good and kind and loving. So in a way, we're not seeing how small our problems are; we're actually taking our eyes off our problems completely, for a time, so we can look to, and look at, Jesus.

Martha asks: "Lord, do you not care?..." Of course he cares. But what he cares about most is that we are in relationship with him, listening and learning.

Here, at this communion table, is our opportunity to remember that Jesus cares, to turn our eyes upon Jesus, as the old song goes, and find rest for our souls.

All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly