

“Mary and Martha”
Luke 10:38-42
Sunday, July 17, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

I love this title of Erma Bombeck’s: “If Life Is A Bowl Of Cherries, What Am I Doing Here In The Pits.” In it she tells of two moments in her husband's life:

“There was a time when the children were growing up that her husband used to go and look at the back yard. Surveying the muddy patches where the lawn should be, he would wonder -- Will the grass ever come back?

“And then there was the time when the children were grown and gone that her husband went and looked over the beautiful green lawn, immaculate from lack of use and wondered -- Will the children ever come back?

“Some parts of life are temporary -- some are eternal. Wisdom knows the difference. This is the fundamental issue at stake in the story of Mary and Martha.” (Richard J. Fairchild)

What do we give our attention to? What do we notice? What do we focus on?

I. Hospitality?

In the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus and his disciples continue “on their way” to Jerusalem.

Martha welcomes them with good hospitality. Hospitality has a long tradition among her people, dating back to the time when Abraham welcomed three guests to his tent in Genesis chapter 18.

Martha expects Mary to help, as Sarah helped Abraham. There is much work to be done

when offering hospitality.

Mary has other plans, though. She sits at Jesus' feet, as a disciple might sit.

Martha is perturbed, and not only with Mary. "Lord, don't you care?!" she cries, in v. 40. Martha is angry with Jesus for letting Mary get away with her behavior. Of course, Martha quickly moves to her complaints about Mary. Lord, don't you care that I'm stuck slaving away in the kitchen while Mary lies around doing nothing? "...do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?"

Jesus, in fact, does not care. He does not reprimand Mary at all. Note, however, that he does not concern himself with Martha's busyness, either. He says – we can imagine an indulgent smile on his face, showing love and concern for a frustrated child – "Martha, Martha" – he repeats her name gently, maybe with a quiet chuckle. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

Jesus' concern is that Martha is worried and distracted; not that she is busily working and offering hospitality. Work is good. Welcoming strangers is good. Offering hospitality to a tired traveler is good.

But Martha's desire to offer hospitality is marred by her attitude of frustration. A welcoming heart is more important in hospitality than any amount of food. Have you ever been a guest in the home of a distracted host who makes you feel the whole time as though you are an imposition? Have you ever been so exhausted and frustrated as a host that you had no time to be with your guests? Being present with a visitor to exchange stories and conversation – this is true hospitality.

Jesus is reminding his good friend, Martha, of this fact. He is encouraging her to change her focus, to make time for the one she calls "Lord."

One scholar makes this interesting point about Martha's focus: "The nature of hospitality for which Jesus seeks is realized in attending to one's guest, yet Martha's speech is centered on 'me' talk (3 times). ["my sister... left me...by myself...Tell her to help me."] Though she refers to Jesus as 'Lord' she is concerned to engage his assistance in her plans, not to learn from him." (Joel Green)

II. Work or pray?

We are tempted to understand the story of Mary and Martha as a critique of work. This is difficult for many of us, since we value hard work as a sign of being a good Christian, a good citizen, or a good American.

It has been "reported that Americans work more hours per year than any other major industrial nation. The Germans work an annual average of 1,421 hours per year, the French 1,564, the Japanese 1,784, and Americans 1,804. All of these nations have cut their annual hours by 16 to 20 percent over the last 40 years. The exception is the United States, which has remained more or less static. This is not a recent phenomenon. As long ago as 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the 'feverish ardor' with which 'Americans pursue their own welfare,' and 'this strange unrest of so many happy men, restless in the midst of abundance' (Bk 2, chp. 13). A recent academic paper from professors from the University of Texas and the University of Michigan argues that working long hours for many may be 'an addiction, akin to alcoholism and smoking.' The paper is titled 'The Economics of Workaholism.' The guilty subtitle is 'We should not Have Worked on this Paper.'" (Michael Parker)

We are tempted to interpret the story of Mary and Martha as calling us away from Martha's service into Mary's "better part" of worship, prayer and biblical study. The theologians can help us here.

When Jesus says, “Mary has chosen the better part,” this phrase can also be translated as “good.” “Mary has chosen the ‘good’.”

“[Mary has chosen] the connection to God who is good, the ground and energy of effective action,” says one theologian. (John Shea)

Work is good. From the beginning of time, God creates work, engages in work, and proclaims his work to be “good.” As his children, created in his image, we can find joy in work that is done with integrity. Even the most unpleasant or stressful jobs can have dignity when we dedicate our work to God. Work is good.

The story of Mary and Martha does not have to be a story in which we choose one or the other. We can avoid that temptation by remembering that Jesus does not criticize Martha’s behavior or commend Mary’s behavior. It’s not about sitting at the rabbi’s feet as being better than working in the kitchen. Martha will hopefully get some time at Jesus’ feet, and Mary will hopefully help with the clean-up after the meal, if not with the meal preparations.

We might also remember that the story of Mary and Martha comes right after the story of the Good Samaritan, in which Jesus says, “Go and do!” (Luke 10:37). Later, in Acts 6:3, Luke writes about the specific work of food preparation. He canonizes it as necessary to the life of the community: “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task.” Work, including kitchen work, is essential to the functioning of the Christian community.

There’s a poem from a Salvation Army magazine that speaks to this topic:

“Lord of all pots and pans, since I’ve no time to be

“A saint by doing lovely things, or watching late with Thee

“Or dreaming in dawnlight, or storming heaven's gates

“Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates.”

-- (by M. K. H., as quoted by Carveth Mitchell)

Max Lucado is right on target when he writes: “Every church needs a Martha. Change that. Every church needs a hundred Marthas. Sleeves rolled up and ready, they keep the pace for the church. Because of 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 a Martha is missing and all the Marys of the church start scrambling to find the keys to lock doors, turn off the lights and turn off the fans. Yes, the Marthas are the Energizer Bunnies of the church. They keep going and going and going.

“Martha was a live wire to be sure. However, even live wires need a time out for recharging. Work without worship will soon burn you out. Even in church we can lose our sense of perspective.”

I agree 100%. The church needs Marthas. And Marthas need recharging on a regular basis.

III. Undivided attention.

What is important is the focus on Jesus, whatever we are doing – working, praying, relaxing, playing. All of life needs to be centered in God – in Jesus!

Jesus commends Mary for choosing the “good,” for choosing God. God, as revealed in the scriptures, is at work in his church and in all creation, guiding us through the power of his Holy Spirit to do the things Jesus did – love the poor, care for the sick, comfort the prisoner.

Martha chooses God, too, in that she carries out his call to welcome the stranger and to feed the hungry. She simply misses the part about focusing on him.

We are called to work for God. We are called to focus on God's presence and power in our lives. That presence and power enables us to do the good work to which God also calls us.

God is at work, too, of course. God is at work, creating the universe and all that is in it. God is at work, saving all that he has created, including you and me. God is at work sustaining all that he has created – keeping the stars in the sky and waking us up this morning to get us to church.

You know the story from Genesis. Six days God worked. And on the seventh day, he rested. Sabbath rest is a crucial part of God's plan.

One purpose of Sabbath rest is God's plan to sustain us. We need rest every day, and we need a deeper rest one day a week. When we follow this pattern, we have the energy and the focus to do good work. God's plan for us is a cycle of work-rest-work.

Besides our own health and happiness, the purpose of the Sabbath is to spend time in our relationship with God. The Sabbath is a day to worship. It is a day to listen more closely to God's leadings, and to follow where God takes us.

Jesus asks Martha for her attention. Look away for a moment from chopping vegetables and notice me!

God asks for our complete and undivided attention, at least one day a week.

Closing

Jesus is our highest priority. If we keep our eyes on him, everything else will fall into place, no matter what challenges, or grief, or disappointment we may face.

Do you think of yourself as a Mary? Jesus loves Mary. He sees her desire to be in relationship with him, and he rewards it.

Do you think of yourself as a Martha? Jesus loves Martha. He sees her sinking under the

burden of worry and distraction, stress and overwork. His intention is not to criticize her – this would only add to her burden. His desire is to remind her that he has a relationship with her, too; she is just as important to him as Mary is.

Charles Wesley honors both women, and the characteristics they encourage in all of us.

He writes:

“Faithful to my Lord's commands

“I still would choose the better part;

“Serve with careful Martha's hands

“And loving Mary's heart.”

Set aside your worries and your distractions. Choose “the better part.” Choose “the good.” Choose God.

In every moment: choose God.

Amen.