

Pastor's Message – 7/17/22  
Luke 10:38-42

Before I read the Bible passage again, look at the bulletin cover picture and imagine that that is the dinner table. Take a moment to put yourself in the story. Imagine that you are looking down upon the scene in the home of Mary and Martha. There are four people in the picture. Which one is Jesus? Which one is Mary? Where are the other disciples? Where are you? Imagine Martha entering – where does she enter from? Where does she stand, in relation to you? In relation to the others?

Let's take a quick poll. Raise your hands, those of you who are off-site can do this to, "How many side with the sister, Martha, who is doing all the work?" "How many side with the sister, Mary, who is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him?"

As I have grown older and have been in different situations, different churches, I continue to learn who I am, my strengths and weaknesses, my gifts, what I bring to the table in different situations. So, I kind of empathize with Martha; I might be busy doing the practical stuff too. That's kind of my strength.

It follows the psychology of personality traits linked to birth order. Typically, first-borns are natural leaders. They also tend to be reliable, conscientious and perfectionists who don't like surprises. Although, firstborns are typically aggressive, many are also compliant people pleasers. They are model children who have a strong need for approval from anyone in charge.

Middle children are the most difficult to pin down. They are almost guaranteed to be opposite of their older sibling, but that difference can manifest in a variety of ways. Middle children often feel like their older brother gets all the glory while their younger sister escapes all discipline. Because the middle child feels that the world pays him less attention, he tends to be secretive; he does not openly share his thoughts or feelings.

Middle children may not feel they have a special place in the family, so friends and peer groups become much more important. They can usually read people well, they are peacemakers who see all sides of a situation, they are independent and inventive.

Babies of the family are social and outgoing; they are the most financially irresponsible of all birth orders. They just want to have a good time. These kids love the limelight. While lastborns may be charming, they also have the potential to be manipulative, spoiled or babied to the point of helplessness. The lastborn is the one who will probably still have a pet name although he's twenty-nine and has a master's degree.

All of that being said, there are exceptions. But I wonder if Martha is a firstborn?

Consider this little story: One day a man comes home from work to find total mayhem at home. The kids were outside, still in their pajamas, playing in the mud and muck. There were empty food boxes and wrappers all around. As he proceeded into the house, he found an even bigger mess — dishes on the counter, dog food spilled on the floor, a broken glass under the table, and a small pile of sand by the back door. The family room was strewn with toys and various items of clothing, and a lamp had been knocked over.

He headed up the stairs, stepping over toys, to look for his wife. He was becoming worried that she may be ill, or that something had happened to her. He found her in the bedroom, still in bed with her pajamas on, reading a book. She looked up at him, smiled, and asked how his day went.

He looked at her bewildered and asked, “What happened here today?”

She again smiled and answered, “You know every day when you come home from work and ask me what I did today?”

“Yes,” was his reply.

She answered, “Well, today I didn’t do it!”

I don’t know about you, but I think Martha got a bad rap! Let’s face it. Without the Marthas of the world, where would we be? Most of us depend heavily on Marthas to make certain our socks match...our meals are reasonably nutritious, and at least half the time we show up where we are supposed to be at the right time with the right stuff!

And, for the record...there are as many male Marthas in the world as there are female Marthas. Our Bible reading today is not an indictment against women.

It is hard for those in our contemporary church to read the story of Mary and Martha without faulting Martha. Yet, Martha is doing exactly what was expected of a hostess in the ancient world. The words Luke uses to describe her initial behavior are overwhelmingly positive. Why then does Jesus not commend her hard work and remind Mary of her place?

I think it may come down to the notion of distraction.

Jesus is not devaluing Martha’s considerable efforts, nor is he prompting a competition between the two sisters. Rather, Jesus contrasts Martha’s distractedness with Mary’s willingness to absorb all that he offers. The better part, he is suggesting, is to realize what is most necessary in that moment.

Jesus says Mary is the model. But Martha is the reality. There's no question we live in a Martha world. The church tells us to beat the pavement for justice and mission. Worship leaders challenge us to serve, to respond to

our calling. The church board reminds us to volunteer in the nursery, attend next week's potluck dinner, donate nonperishable canned goods, take our turn advising the middle-school youth group. In other words, to be Marthas.

What's at issue is whether or not it's possible to be Mary in a Martha world.

Is it better to be a Mary or a Martha?

Of course, that's the simple form of the question. If Martha is understood as a type of the active Christian, the Christian at work in the world, and if Mary is seen as a type of the passive Christian, withdrawn from the world in the quest for prayer and contemplation, the question then can move beyond the Mary-Martha dichotomy to a discussion of the relative merits of active service versus quiet devotion.

The Martha Christians sweat and slave in the kitchen/world; the Mary Christians prefer to study, pray, reflect, and make daily journal entries. Jesus says Mary's got it right; Martha's got it wrong. His words are a strong reminder that sometimes we get too busy doing - instead of just being. We tend to get preoccupied with serving God and forget to take time out to know God better.

Perhaps it is a false dilemma. It's quite possible that Mary did her part in the kitchen, helped her sister with the preparations prior to Jesus' arrival, vacuumed the sitting room, and swept off the porch, kneaded the bread and stoked the fire.

But when the guest arrived, the work, she knew, must stop, and she chose to sit at the feet of Jesus and engage in a conversation - the details of which remain unknown to us.

Martha, on the other hand, could not let it go.

In a surprising turn of expectations, Mary - rather than taking the culturally assigned role of providing the physical necessities of hospitality - places herself at the feet of Jesus. This is the traditional place for the disciples (always male) of a teacher. Jesus affirms Mary's choice to learn from him.

The power of Mary is that she has her priorities straight. While Martha fusses around in the kitchen, "distracted by her many tasks" (v. 40), while Mary leaves her stuff in a pile and plops down at the feet of Jesus. She's showing that she loves the Lord her God with all her heart, all her soul, all her strength, and all her mind (v. 27) - she's demonstrating her love of God by focusing intensely on his word as it is coming to her through Jesus.

Martha, on the other hand, is distracted by her work, and unable to hear the word of God. You may remember the story that Jesus told, just two chapters earlier in the gospel of Luke, about what happens when a seed - representing the word of God - falls among thorns. In that case, the fruit of

the seed cannot mature, because the thorny people are preoccupied with “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” (8:14).

I’ve been talking about the costs and priorities of Christian living and of faith the past two weeks, today and the next couple Sundays too. These priorities are critically important, but they’re maintained at a cost. Just as Mary shattered social expectations and brought shame on her family by sitting at the feet of Jesus, those who focus on God’s word are going to find themselves on a countercultural path.

The gospel of Luke positions the familiar story today as the second panel of a trio of teaching about what is central to the life of discipleship. Next week, we’ll hear the version of the Lord’s Prayer as Luke tells it and the parable of the midnight guest who must be fed.

There is a line in our Bible reading today that should cause each one of us to pay close attention: “There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.”

What is that one thing? Here is where we need to look beyond the lines we draw and focus on that one thing. What is that one thing that will outlast the meal and dirty dishes? What is that one thing that will survive the bickering between churches? What is that one thing that will determine whether or not a person is in or out?

We are called to listen to God’s word of grace, and then let it shape our lives each day. In the kingdom of God, it is Jesus – and not our own actions – that holds all together. Which of our customs and traditions and priorities and values are blocking us from faithfully listening and responding to God’s word? What are the things in our lives, even in the church, that we need to let go of? What are the things we’re involved in that prevent us from listening to and following Jesus?

Jesus’ words should remind those of us of who we serve that we do so freely, and it matters not only what we do, but how and why we do what we do. Our motivations and attitudes are important.

“But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing’” (vv. 41-42a). Jesus reminds us, too, that there is just one thing important. Jesus doesn’t tell Martha to stop being hospitable; he invites her to stop being anxious about it all. He doesn’t tell Mary that she never has to wash another dish; he affirms that, for the moment, she has her priority appropriately set on listening to the Word of God. That is the one thing – to keep our eyes and ears and hearts set on Jesus.