

“Distracted By Many Things”

Luke 10:38-42

Sunday, July 18, 2010—Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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There’s nothing like a good family conflict to capture our interest, and this morning’s familiar story of Mary and Martha is as good a family conflict story as you’ll find in Scripture. It’s Jesus who triggers the conflict, by showing up to visit his good friends Mary and Martha. Hospitality to guests was a very important value in the ancient world, and Jesus was a very honored guest. So Martha rushes off to do everything that would be expected of her. It’s the equivalent of putting on a Thanksgiving dinner for your entire extended family of twenty or thirty people. Chop the carrots, peel the potatoes, stuff the turkey and get it in the oven, wash the good china, roll out the piecrusts, and if there’s a minute to spare, it’s time to dust those window sills. And maybe we better empty the trash, too, even though there’s hardly anything in there. And then back to making the salad.

So what’s the conflict? Well, it seems like Sister Mary isn’t pulling her weight. Not only is she not in kitchen helping, she’s out in the living room—sitting. Sitting there, just listening to Jesus, hanging on his every word, not lifting a finger to help out. No wonder Martha was starting to feel her blood beginning to boil. She’s so mad she does what all of us know is exactly the wrong thing to do when you’re mad at someone; instead of going directly to Mary and saying, “Mary, I could use some help.” She decides to bring her frustrations to someone else, in this case, Jesus. “Jesus, help me out here. Here I am doing all the work, while she does nothing but sit and listen to you talk. Can’t you tell her to get off her you know what and get into the kitchen and do her part? I’m tired of being the only person doing any work around here!”

Usually Jesus had the good sense not to allow himself to get pulled into other people’s family conflicts. This wasn’t the first time someone asked him to do that. Usually he refused. When a man once asked him to settle a family inheritance quarrel, he had the presence of mind to respond with a question: who made me judge over you? But this time, he actually jumps into the fray. Sure, he’s gentle in the way he says it, but it sure sounds like he’s taking sides. Martha, dear Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things. Chill. Your sister Mary has made a good choice, she’s focused on what’s really important, and what can’t be taken from her (Luke 10:41).

The traditional interpretation of this story has Jesus making a distinction between two types of disciples.

Martha the hard worker, you know the type, the church could use a bunch more of them. They’re the ones that get everything done, the multi-taskers. There always ready to serve wherever needed. You name it, whether it’s the community outreach meal, teaching Sunday school or tending the flower beds, they are there. Not even those boring committee meetings seem to faze them. Then there are the contemplative types, the ones who love Bible study and prayer and spiritual practices but never seem to get around to doing much of anything practical. The traditional interpretation pictures Mary, the contemplative, deeply spiritual introvert who sits at Jesus’ feet listening to him, as Jesus’ favorite. Someone who knew I was preaching on this text today told me that this text always makes her feel guilty when she doesn’t go to church. After all,

didn't Jesus say it was more important to listen to him than to do all those things that make us busy, busy busy all the time? Isn't this story all about praising Mary and blaming Martha?

I don't think that was Jesus' point. He wasn't saying church is more important than fixing dinner when guests come over. He wasn't criticizing Martha's hospitality; after all, hospitality was something his people had always valued very highly, clear on back to the days of Abraham. Offering hospitality, making guests comfortable, welcoming strangers, these are some of the most precious and prominent Biblical values. Besides, doesn't this story come right after the story of the good Samaritan, where Jesus seems to be saying, the really important thing is not how devoutly you pray, not how many hours you study Torah—after all, the priest and the Levite surely were highly accomplished at prayer and Torah study, yet when they saw the injured man who was mugged on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, they walked right on by. There, Jesus seems to be saying, what's important is not what you think you know about God, it's not what you believe about God, it's how you act on what you believe. Look at the Samaritan who helped the injured man, then go and do likewise. So doesn't acting and doing sound more like Martha than like Mary? So how does Martha get such a bad rap?

Well, maybe the Mary and Martha story isn't that simple.

Some scholars think the story is really about a debate that was going on in the early church, about the appropriateness of women holding leadership roles. Some think Luke was expressing his position, that women should be passive, silent, and subservient; they should sit still and listen, as we see Mary doing. But this is neither consistent with Jesus' ministry, nor is it consistent with the rest of Luke's gospel, which celebrates the roles of strong and assertive women. Besides, by sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary was taking the traditional posture of the disciple, a role historically held only by men. No, this is not a story about the proper roles for women in the church.

Martha's problem is not that she's doing the wrong thing—it's that she's distracted. Part of what it means when we say God became a human being and came to live among us as Jesus Christ, is that this world, the real, messy, everyday world in which you and I live, is also the world in which God lives. And that means that we can find God in the real, messy, everyday events of our lives. In those small, mundane ways in which you and I spend our time, eating, bathing, driving, working, you can find God wherever you are and whatever you are doing. You can meet God in church, and I hope you do. But church is not the only place that God hangs out. I think one of the great barriers to our growth in the life of faith is the notion that God is confined to the church on Sunday morning, and has nothing to do with what goes on in our lives during the rest of the week.

We can get so focused on what we are doing that it distracts us from seeing and experiencing the presence of God. That's what happened to Martha. Jesus was right there, a guest in her own living room, and she was so distracted by her many tasks that she really didn't see him. She got so obsessed with the work of being a proper host that she forgot to pay attention to the guest. She reminds us that the holy is all around us. We can miss it, if like Martha, we allow our good and God-given work to distract us. We can miss it if we fall prey to what technologist Linda Stone refers to as the "disease of the Internet age—continuous partial attention." We text while we drive, sometimes with disastrous results. We talk on the phone while checking our e-mail. We

listen to our i-pods while doing household chores. We multi-task. Martha, dear friend Martha, we are so distracted by so many things.

So perhaps this story is a call to slow down, focus on the nearness of God in everyday things, to truly pay attention to what is going on around us, especially to the people around us.

Writing in the “Metropolitan Diary” column in the New York Times recently, Linda Yarden tells about going to a police station to be fingerprinted for a background check, as part of the long and sometimes overwhelmingly bureaucratic process of becoming an adoptive parent. It was a gray, sooty, imposing building, and she and her husband entered feeling fearful and intimidated. They were greeted by a grumpy desk sergeant sitting on an elevated podium who gruffly instructed them to state their business. “Take a seat,” he told them after they told him why they were there. A little later, another officer appeared, also tall and imposing, who re-stated their request, and then to their surprise stepped down from his platform to speak to them. He said, “My wife and I struggled for a long while, and we just adopted a child last year. It is life’s greatest gift. And so, it is my pleasure to do this for you. Won’t you please give me your hands so I can fingerprint them?” Which they did, when the tears stopped.

You see, you can find yourself in a holy moment at any place and any time, if you are paying attention.

Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of paying attention as a spiritual practice. It can be as simple, she says, as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore. “To see takes time, like having a friend takes time,” she writes. “It is as simple as turning off the television to learn the song of a single bird. Why should anyone do such things? I cannot imagine—unless one is weary of crossing days off the calendar with no sense of what makes the last day different from the next...the practice of paying attention..is one way into a different way of life, full of treasure for those who are willing to pay attention to exactly where they are.” (*An Altar in the World*, p.33).

Patrick McDonnell is a cartoonist whose work was featured recently on the PBS series, *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*. His cartoon strips express his spiritual conviction about the importance of living in the now, not allowing ourselves to be distracted by trivial and unimportant things. Many of his strips feature dogs and cats, who know something about living in the joy of the moment. He also has written a picture book, “Just Like Heaven”, in which the cat Mooch falls asleep and dreams that he has gone to heaven. He looks around and sees not pearly gates and streets paved with gold, but all his familiar surroundings, all the things he’s lived with his whole life, from his favorite rug in the sun to his favorite people, except he sees them with new eyes. Maybe that’s what heaven really is, just a change of perspective on what is already right before our eyes. Maybe we can see that way right now, if we are not distracted by so many things.

The Mary and Martha story makes it clear that even the good things we do to serve Jesus and his church can become our distractions, if they do not grow out of our love of God and our vision of what God is doing in the world. If we try to do God’s work without that connection, we’ll burn ourselves out. Like Martha, we’ll become worried, anxious, exhausted and resentful because we do so much and others do so little. So, like Mary, we need to sit at Jesus’ feet, to listen, to be reminded.

What did Mary learn, listening at Jesus' feet? She heard, that God is in the world, loving and caring for all people, and calling us to do the same. She heard that the poor, the hungry, the strangers and outsiders and wounded and lonely are precious to God. She heard, I am with you always, do not be afraid. She heard that when we join God in God's work of healing and restoring the world, we will be blessed, because we will see God.

One of the stories we used in Vacation Bible School this past week was Luke's account of the healing of the blind beggar. We talked about how everyone looked down on him, how he couldn't work and was dependent on the charity of others to eat. We talked about how people feared him, how they thought his blindness was a punishment because he or someone in his family had done something bad. We talked about how others avoided him because they feared his misfortune would rub off on them. We talked about how he cried out to get Jesus' attention, and how all the people around him told him to shut up, that he wasn't important enough to take up Jesus' time. And we talked about how Jesus called him over and asked, what do you want me to do for you?

One of the children at Vacation Bible School that day was a boy about ten years old who was severely disabled. He could neither talk nor sit for more than a moment or two. He made a lot of loud, grunting noises. The teachers had trouble controlling him and kept taking him outside. I won't lie. His behavior was annoying. It made it very hard to focus on what I was doing, you know, teaching the Bible story, trying to keep the kids engaged and interested. And then, as I heard myself saying, it doesn't matter how rich you are, how smart you are, how successful you are, how beautiful you are, everyone is important to Jesus, my eyes fell on this child.

Later I asked the children to imagine themselves in the story, to imagine Jesus asking them, what do you want me to do for you?

And when I asked myself that question, almost immediately the plea of the blind beggar rose to my lips: I want to see, Lord, O please, heal me and let me see.

God is all around us. Don't miss God because you are distracted with many things.

Thanks be to God. Amen.