

**Sunday, July 21, 2019**  
**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 11 (Year C)**  
Luke 10.38-42  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

Like many people, particularly in our success-driven, production-oriented society, today's Gospel passage makes me a little uncomfortable. At times, I even feel chastised and put down by Jesus' words to Martha. After all, Martha is my soul sister. I love my to-do lists and even have an app on my phone that allows me to categorize them and sort tasks by due date. And what is even better is that my phone's to-do app syncs with my work computer, my laptop at home, and my tablet. I can access my to-do list wherever I am, whenever I want. And of course, I love my calendar. In fact, I keep both a digital and a paper version of my calendar. Quirky to have both, but the digital calendar is synced across all my electronic devices so I always have access to it no matter where I am. And the paper calendar provides a kinesthetic aspect that helps me remember my appointments better than just by putting them in my digital calendar. I am super-organized, so I know exactly where everything is (well, most of the time). And I absolutely love reading articles and blogs on productivity and time management in search of that one new gem that will make me even more productive or help me use my time even more efficiently. I tell you, Martha's got nothing on me. I could run circles around her when it comes to being productive.

But according to Jesus, that apparently isn't enough. Luke tells us that "Martha was distracted by her many tasks" (Lk 10.40) and went to Jesus seeking his help in being more productive. Mainly by trying to get him to press her sister Mary "the slacker" into service. Many hands make light work. Which means you then have time to get even more done, right? But Jesus responds to Martha's well-meaning request: "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" (Lk 10.41-42).

But truth be told, there is that part of me—even as I'm feeling personally chastised as Jesus admonishes my soul sister—that longs to be more like Mary. That part of me that longs to just sit at the feet of Jesus and soak in his wisdom, his love, his grace. This is a personal struggle I have had pretty much my whole adult life. How to move out of my head—analyzing everything, calculating how best to get things done—and into my heart. To be more open and receptive to the grace that only God can offer. To just be open to experiencing the presence of God bathing me in his love. To be able to focus not on constantly doing, but to focus merely on being with God in this moment, with no concerns for the next task on my to-do list or the next appointment on my calendar.

So this passage from Luke's Gospel always hits me with mixed feelings. Feelings of being admonished for being so much like Martha, and feelings of hope and longing for being more like Mary. And if I have mixed emotions about this passage, if I have this ongoing struggle between my inner Martha and my inner Mary, I would guess that many of you have similar struggles, as well. Particularly in our society where busyness is often worn as a badge of honor—as we declare to any and all who will listen just how busy we are. As if our busyness

somehow makes us more righteous and worthwhile as human beings. That the life of frenetic activity is somehow preferable to a more contemplative, prayerful life—a life focused on seeking to be in the presence of God. This is an age-old dichotomy between the active and the contemplative, between doing and being.

It's not just our secular society that has fallen prey to this dichotomy of doing vs. being, of Martha vs. Mary. Of viewing Martha with greater esteem than we do Mary. The church is not immune to this dichotomy. If you hang around churches long enough, you find that the church is often more interested in doing than in just being. Because doing, being productive, validates that we are engaged in something worthwhile. Something that is measurable. Proof that we are actually doing the work of the Gospel. Being, on the other hand, is less tangible. It is not measurable. We can't point to a visible result as proof that we have actually done something worthwhile.

But to focus on this dichotomy of being vs. doing, of Mary vs. Martha, really misses the point that Jesus is trying to make—even as he himself seems to set up the dichotomy by saying “Mary has chosen the better part.” In actuality, this passage is not really meant to create a division between contemplative and active life. The distinction between Mary and Martha is actually found in the fact that Martha is fretting about not being able to get everything done by herself, that she is distracted by her many tasks. What Jesus is really trying to get at is that it is fretting and worrying that is the obstacle to authentic discipleship—to truly doing what and being who Jesus desires Martha to be.

Why is Martha so distracted? Actually, it's for good reason. It's about hospitality. She is trying to do her best to be the consummate hostess. Hospitality was an important social obligation in the ancient Near East. Jesus' itinerant ministry depended on the support of those who offered him hospitality. Mary and Martha seek to live up to this culture of hospitality by providing Jesus with safe lodging. Martha is attempting to provide Jesus with the best possible welcome. In so doing, she is inadvertently neglecting to pay proper attention to her guest. And as a result, she misses out on what her guest has to offer her. You see, hospitality is about more than attending to the physical needs of one's guests. Hospitality is also about treating each one as he or she wishes to be received. For Jesus, what he really wants as a sign of hospitality is for people to receive the teaching he has to offer. The teaching that Mary freely accepts by sitting at Jesus' feet.

Both Mary and Martha are demonstrating hospitality in their own unique ways. Though, in actuality, neither is completely living up to the ideal of hospitality. Martha is all about doing hospitality, so misses out on truly meeting her guest's desires. Mary is all about receiving her guest and meeting his deepest desires, but does not do anything to help in creating the comforts associated with a hospitable setting. Hence, the conflict between the two sisters. While both are doing their part, neither are completely living up to—or in to—the ideal of hospitality, the ideal of living the Gospel, the ideal of a life of discipleship.

As one commentator notes, “Luke's Gospel repeatedly emphasizes that discipleship is characterized by *service* as well as by *listening to the word*—each response is dependent on the other. The intent here is not to force a choice between active and contemplative responses to

Christ. Doing without listening can become purposeless; while listening without doing also is incomplete. Mary's actions . . . affirm that discipleship has to do not only with *love of neighbor*, but also with *love of God*—not only with active service, but also with patient attention to God's word." (*Synthesis*, Proper 11, 7/21/19). Martha is so focused on engaging in service that she is forgetting why she does it. What Mary brings to the proverbial party is affirmation of the why. That all service performed out of love of one's neighbor is rooted in the love of God. While engaging in the work of the Gospel, the work of discipleship, we cannot lose sight of God's presence in the midst of our acts of service.

Jesus' comments, while seeming to praise Mary as he criticizes Martha, is really a commentary on the human inclination to focus on one particular thing and losing sight of the "big picture." What this conflict, this dichotomy, between Mary and Martha lifts up is the proper way to engage in the work of the Gospel. The real question is how, even in the midst of the busyness of life, do we be attentive to God's presence? In our busyness, are we ignoring Christ so we can take care of business? God is present in our lives—in every aspect of our lives—regardless of what activities we happen to be doing. The problem becomes when the busyness, the activities, distract us from being attentive to God's presence.

Dr. Aaron Kuecker of Trinity Christian College notes that "Martha's generous service is not minimized by Jesus, but her worries show that her service needs to be grounded in Mary's kind of love for him. Together, the sisters embody the truth that generosity and love of God are intertwined realities" (quoted in *Synthesis*, Proper 11, 7/21/19). Martha performs the kind of generosity Jesus commands throughout his ministry. Mary shows that all our service needs to be grounded in a dynamic personal relationship with him. This is what Jesus means when he tells Martha that "there is need of only one thing." From this perspective, Jesus is not criticizing Martha for working. Acts of service are central to the proclaiming of the Gospel. But rather, Jesus calls her away from what distracts her—what gets in the way of her being fully present to him and to God. He is rather inviting her into a new way of entering into her busyness.

When it comes to the work of the Church, we sometimes become more focused on the work itself. Worrying and fretting about how we are going to get it all done. Worrying about the details. And while this is important, Jesus reminds us that we should not—that we cannot—lose sight of why we are doing this work. In the Church, all the activity, which is crucial, is merely preparation for what is truly important—for being with Jesus, for being with God's people. All the activity is first and foremost about us showing the unbounded love of God for all his beloved children. All the activity we engage in is to be a sacramental sign—an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace—of God's love and care.

It's not an either/or. It's a both/and. So rather than worrying so much about the specifics of our ministries, of our many tasks, maybe what we need is to slow down a bit. To step back a moment and take a deep breath and just rest in the presence of our Lord. Even if only for a few minutes. To step out of our Martha-ness and try on our Mary-ness. To regain perspective. To reconnect with "the one thing" that is needed, with the "better part"—the presence of God that gives all our acts of service meaning and makes all our acts of service possible.