

Sunday, July 17, 2022
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 11 (Year C)

Luke 10.38-42

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/749804889481516>

(Sermon begins at about 18:45)

“Driven to Distraction”

Six years ago, I was looking for a job. One of the places I was in the search process was St. Gregory's. In fact, I was one of the finalists for the job as your Rector. And six years ago yesterday, I had my formal interviews with the Vestry. The interviews that would determine whether I would become the fourth Rector of St. Gregory's, or whether one of the other candidates would have that honor. I remember that day well. All too well.

That Saturday morning, as I got ready for the interview, I was feeling all excited and self-confident. And a little nervous, of course. But I was prepared. I had brought my best suit to wear. I brought a clergy collar and the accessories to fasten it to my clergy shirt. I brought a cross to wear. I had everything I needed to make a good impression. To dress the part of the parish priest. And then came the horrible realization that I forgot to pack a clergy shirt. A critical piece of the priest's "uniform." As I was getting ready to leave the day before, I had become so distracted, so worried, about beating the Friday afternoon traffic that I had not doublechecked to make sure I had everything I needed.

You can't just run to a local store and pick up a clergy shirt. I had no choice but to come to my interview—the interview for a job that I wanted more than any I had ever applied for—in Dockers and a short sleeve polo shirt that I had worn the day before. I was so embarrassed. Upon arriving at St. Gregory's, I apologized profusely to the members of the Vestry for not being appropriately attired. I assured them that I did indeed own clericals. They were, of course, very gracious, and assured me there was nothing to worry about.

The first part of the interview process that Saturday morning six years ago was to conduct a Eucharist for the Vestry, including preaching on the readings for the next day. Given our three-year lectionary cycle, the readings that day were the same as those we just heard. The Gospel being the well-known story of two sisters: Mary and Martha. And the differences between the two. Mary, being the one, as we are told, "who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." And Martha, who was "distracted by her many tasks." Who is resentful of being the one doing all the work, to the point of her going to their guest, Jesus, and complaining "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." The story that has come to epitomize the two prevailing personality types of people in the church: the Marys and the Marthas. Marys, being those who are more focused on the contemplative side of faith. Those who want to sit at Jesus' feet and soak up all that he has to offer. Those who spend their time studying Scripture, praying and meditating, just being in the presence of the Divine. Those who want to soak in the Gospel and have it become a part of who they are. And Marthas being those who are more focused on action. Those who are focused on

doing ministry. Helping out however they can, getting their hands dirty, constantly on the move. Not content to just hear about the Gospel but wanting to live the Gospel in tangible ways.

As I started preparing my sermon for today, I resisted going back to look at what I actually said about Mary and Martha six years ago, not wanting that sermon to influence this one. But I do remember that I started by asking who identified as a Mary and who identified as a Martha. As I recall, most, if not all the members of the Vestry were Marthas. I went on to talk about how I, too, am a Martha, loving my to-do lists, loving to be busy. I think I also probably talked about my own personal struggle that parallels the struggle between the sisters in our Gospel reading. As a Martha, I have always been a bit envious of Marys. Of the ability to just “be” in the presence of God, as opposed to focusing on doing. As I often characterize it, my desire to move out of my head, where I am always planning and trying to figure out what to do, what the next steps are, and to move into my heart. To be able to just rest in the presence of God without feeling like after two seconds I have to jump up and get to work on doing ministry. To be able to dwell for a time in that place where I am not ministering to and helping nourish others, but where I myself can be ministered to and nourished by God’s loving presence.

This struggle between the sisters in our Gospel reading is actually an analogy for the struggle that so many Christians have in their own lives. While we often talk about people being a Mary or a Martha, the reality is that—with all due respect to Jesus’ response to Martha—those of us engaged in ministry really do need both Mary and Martha. There are elements of both Mary and Martha that live within us and come together to allow us to be effective in our ministries. The contemplative side that Mary brings to the table helps us to learn the Gospel message, to internalize the Gospel, to understand what it is all about. That side helps us to understand what the Gospel invites the followers of Jesus to do. And conversely, Marthas do not generally engage in ministry just because they want something to do. Marthas do what they do because they are driven to put the Gospel into action in very real ways. Just as Jesus commands elsewhere in scripture.

After all, the final instructions Jesus gives to his disciples before his ascension is not to sit around all day gazing at their navels. In the Great Commission, he tells them to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt 28.19-20a). What Jesus commands is that his followers go out and do something. To proclaim the Gospel. To share God’s love. The implication is that occurs by doing what he himself did: teaching, preaching, feeding, and healing. That the Gospel is to be proclaimed through teaching and preaching, appealing to the Mary side of people. But sharing the Gospel in all its fullness also requires doing: feeding and healing. Caring for the widowed and the orphaned. Meeting physical needs, as well as spiritual needs. By engaging in Martha-like activities.

So, as I contemplate—in Mary mode—the juxtaposition between Mary and Martha in our Gospel reading, I am less convinced that the story is about one being better than the other. Now, admittedly, after Martha complains about Mary being a slacker, Jesus gently and lovingly corrects her: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need for only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” But I

don't think that Jesus is saying what we think he is saying. That it is better to be a Mary than to be a Martha. I think instead, he is saying that there is one quality that Mary possesses that Martha does not. That is the better part Jesus refers to. Or maybe a better way of putting it is that Martha has something that she needs to get rid of.

And what is that? The clue is in the fact that twice in the Gospel reading we are told that Martha was distracted. Luke's narrative of the events of the story tell us "Martha was distracted by her many tasks." And then, when Jesus corrects her, he names it: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things." That she is so distracted that she is not able to be effective or productive, or so it seems. Things slip through the cracks. Like forgetting to pack a clergy shirt. I think most of us Marthas understand the mentality. Distracted, likely by the overwhelming length of the to-do list, that there are too many things to do and not enough hours in the day or days in the week. Worried that it won't all get done. The distraction and worrying getting in the way of being able to focus and get things done in a timely and efficient manner. Not to mention the distraction and worry about things that come up unexpectedly. Like guests dropping by, throwing the whole day's plans into a tailspin. More distractions, more worrying. In Jesus lifting up Mary as having "chosen the better part," he is really pointing out that worry and distraction, while one of the common traits of Marthas, is generally counterproductive. That sometimes, rather than powering headlong through the to-do list, taking a page from Mary's playbook can actually be the best thing for a Martha's productivity. To step back, take a breath, and look at the bigger picture. What is truly important here? What absolutely has to be done? But more importantly, to take time to rest in, to re-energize and draw energy from God. To re-focus on just why we are doing what we are doing: for the glory of God. Trusting that, if we take a few moments to connect with God, he will strengthen us, inspire us, give us what we need, to continue with what needs to be accomplished.

In my own life and spiritual journey, particularly over the last few years, I have been able to make a little movement—brief though it may be, at times—from head to heart. From Martha-like activity to Mary-like contemplation. I have recognized in my own life and my work as a priest that I actually have access to both Mary and Martha within myself, and that I need both sides. I have discovered that when I spend a little time each day tending to the Mary side of my life, to the contemplative, I am far more energized and productive when I have to go into Martha mode. And I find that after a period of Martha-like work, when I am drained, when I am distracted, particularly when I am worrying, taking a few moments to slip into Mary mode can provide the respite I need to re-energize myself. To re-center and re-orient myself. And I find that when I do that, I end up being far more productive, far more efficient, than if I had just tried to power through on my own, relying solely on my Martha side. I have come to recognize that staying in my default Martha mode will not make me more effective and productive. Rather, that to be more effective and productive in ministry—to be more effective and productive in my life in general—I need both Mary and Martha, being together, working together.

I find it interesting that this reading comes during the summer, when things are a little slower in parish life and in our own lives. When we are less in Martha mode and hopefully a little more in Mary mode. I know that it is really because of how the lectionary apportionings readings for this

time of the liturgical year. But still . . . Maybe this reading, occurring when it does, is an invitation to all of us—particularly the Marthas—to try slowing down, not being so distracted, not being so worried, and finding a little time in the midst of our busy days, our hectic schedules, our never-ending to-do lists, to make time to just be with God. To allow God to nourish us, re-energize us, strengthen us. I promise you, taking that time with God will make a huge difference in your life of faith and your productivity.