

July 28th 2019
Luke 10:38-42

But Only One Thing is Necessary

I had us reread the story of Martha and Mary this week since it is a powerful story about discipleship. Last week when Sabrina read this story she made the comment that she thought God might be trying to get her attention. It turns out that this was the third time since she started being a Scripture reader that her assigned Sunday to read happened to fall on the Sunday we read this story. Which is an impressive coincidence considering we only read about Martha's fretting and Mary's listening once every three years in the lectionary cycle of readings.

Sabrina is not the first person to identify with Martha. I'm guessing that if we were to hold a quick poll this morning in the sanctuary, a clear majority of us would identify more with Martha than we would with Mary. It is a commonly acknowledged fact in U.C.C. churches like ours that many of us are far more likely to be doers of the Word - serving and helping - than we are to sit and hear the Word of the Lord.

The story of Martha and Mary is relatively straightforward. A woman named Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. Martha does the work while her sister Mary listens to Jesus, a reality Martha is quick to complain about. What makes this story simple is that it is not a parable that has layers of meaning and symbols like the story of the Good Samaritan, the story that precedes this one. It is also not a teaching story like the verses that follow in chapter 11 where Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray. Rather, it is a dialogue between Jesus and Martha that has implications for all of us.

Reading other pastors and theologians' takes on this story this week, it is amazing how many people cast stones at Martha's behavior. I suppose that is for good reason. It is pretty clear in the text that Martha does complain about her sister, Mary, to Jesus. It is also pretty clear that Martha is worried and anxious, fretting about her work and tasks, what are most likely minor things.

But let's be charitable to Martha. I'd like us to first consider what Martha does right. Martha shows hospitality to the Lord Jesus. She is living out the core idea in the Parable of the Good Samaritan that in the kingdom of God even strangers are neighbors. The whole point of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is that

mercy is a sign of faithfulness and obedience to God. The priest and the Levite who step over and ignore the beaten man lying half-dead along the side of the highway may know about God and they may know what the Scriptures say. But they do not know God and walk in the ways of God. It is the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. One deadens and the other brings to life.

We have no indication that Martha knew Jesus before she welcomed him into her home. But what we do know is that in the world of first century Palestine where Jesus lived and ministered, mercy was often expressed through hospitality and welcoming a stranger into one's home and providing food, rest, and safe lodging. I think we are on safe ground to say that Martha really was trying to do what was right and follow the spirit of the law, and love and serve God and her neighbors. She did that by working and welcoming Jesus into her home.

Martha's also in a deep theological tradition. When we consider the practice of hospitality it is important to remember that hospitality is a core tenant of our faith. Because hospitality is a core part of God Almighty's own character. God is hospitable to us in that 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. I think one of the most important ways to understand the gospel and Jesus' death and resurrection is that Jesus' death is for the justification of the ungodly. We who are broken and half-hearted and mean and tired are made right before God simply because in a universal act of love, Christ died for us. No one deserves this. No one earns God's love and mercy, but it is the character of God that God abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness. Jesus himself lives this in the gospel narratives in the stories where he eats with sinners, welcomes friends and foes alike to the table, and draws the outcasts in.

Earlier this week, someone was sharing the story with me of the man in Woodbine who shot a man on his porch steps. The homeowner who shot the man on his porch claims the shooting was an act of self defense. There was a strange and unfamiliar man knocking on his door, he said, screaming obscenities and making threatening claims. But it turns out that the man who was shot actually had the houses mixed up. He was attending a party at a neighboring home, but since homes in developments often look the same, he got confused. He had apparently had too much to drink and went for a walk and when he came back he tried to get into the wrong home.¹

¹ Eric Logan. 'Fatal Shooting 'was a defense of last resort,' Woodbine Homeowner Says. *The Baltimore Sun*. 24 July 2019.

I do not know enough about the circumstances to make a judgement, but it seems to me to be a real life parable for our collective loss of neighborliness. How many of your neighbors do you actually know? I will admit that for me, I know far fewer of my neighbors than I'd like. It seems we are increasingly driven by fear and hostility towards the other, but mostly busyness, than we are with the desire to be hospitable and welcoming.

It was a little different for Martha. Martha models hospitality. Her vice is busyness.

Jesus' reply to Martha's complaints about her sister Mary's idleness is the strong medicine of tough love. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled by many things. But only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the good thing which cannot be taken away from her." (my translation)

With the strong medicine of speaking the truth in love, Jesus cuts through Martha's busyness: in all in her work she has missed the point of her work. In common language, she's lost the forest for the trees. How many of us have done the same and gotten so caught up in our tasks, our problems, our career, our chores that we've lost sight of what is important? I know in ministry it often very easy to do God's work and forget God.

The most helpful commentator I read about this story argued that it is not really about two women where one gets it right and one gets it wrong. Rather, she wrote, it is a story about our divided hearts. Inside of each of us is both a Martha and a Mary.

So the author of the article posed these questions²:

Where are you Martha?

- What distracts you from the important work that must be done?
- How do you determine which work is important and which work doesn't really matter?
- What work have you turned into an idol?
- If Jesus sat in your living room, how would he direct your attention?

² Kristen Berkley-Abbott. 'Putting Ourselves in Martha, Mary, and Jesus' Shoes'. The Christian Century. 19 July 2019.

- What anxieties would keep you from paying full attention to Jesus while he was sitting there?
- What anxieties keep you from paying full attention to Jesus when he isn't sitting there?

Where are you Mary?

- What is the important message that sustains you?
- How do you hear God's voice amid the noise of the chores?
- Are you in danger of neglecting the upkeep work that might be necessary?
- Who is doing work so that you have the time to sit with important issues?
- Who needs to hear you say, "Thank you"?

Where are you in a position like Jesus, observing people go about their business?

- What's the message that others need to hear?
- Who around you simmers with anger and frustration?
- How can you defuse that anger and frustration?
- How can you create meaningful encounters with people who may not be focused on the most important things?

We are going to come full circle to close: all week long, I struggled with this story. That's probably because in the committee meeting going on in my heart between Martha and Mary, Martha dominates the discussion. I was going to show you this video as the opening of this sermon and have a discussion about it. It's from the book and training series, 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People'. We use this training with Soldiers in some of our chaplain led events. We're going to watch the first part and then have a discussion. (Watch video: 16 seconds - 4 minutes)³

So we saw this woman trying to fit all of her big rocks - the things that are important to her, her core values, into a bucket already filled with little rocks - the daily tasks and to-do's that are urgent but not as important.

Question: How could she change the narrative? (hold discussion)

Answer: put big rocks into her bucket first, then put in the little rocks.

Question: What does this symbolize? (hold discussion)

Answer: We need to put first things first. We can't let little things distract us from what is important.

³ <https://resources.franklincovey.com/the-8th-habit/bigrocks>

I thought this was the perfect illustration of the story of Martha and Mary. Mary clearly had her big rocks in her bucket first. She is sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to the Master. She's found the good thing while Martha was anxious and distracted trying to shove her big rocks in the bucket with all of the little rocks. The simple solution would be to have the Martha in us watch this video.

But then it dawned on me driving on Friday evening that there is no gospel, no good news in this. While the illustration of big rocks and little rocks is a good one to help us understand our priorities and what eats up our time, Jesus didn't come to be a self-help guru. He didn't come to help us fit more into our bucket. It's not why he offered tough love to Martha. Jesus came to save us. And so where is the good news in this story for the Martha in you and me?

I'll let you pull your own good news out of this story. But here is the thread of good news that I found: the Lord loves Martha way too much to let her life be defined by what she does. The good thing that Mary has found and that can't be taken away from her is the good thing for us. It is the simple truth that our work, our good deeds, our positive thoughts, our churchiness doesn't save us. The Lord Jesus himself saves. The word for this is grace.

In the name Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.