First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

June 17, 1022

Distracted

Luke 10:38-42

**38**Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. **39**She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus’s feet and listened to what he was saying. **40**But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me.” **41**But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, **42**but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Someone asked me, not to long ago, why the Lectionary doesn’t present scripture in a linear fashion. It’s a good question that I really don’t have an answer for, honestly. It can be difficult for those of us who are left brain focused, because the timeline of Jesus’ ministry simply isn’t presented in a straight line. It would be so much easier if the narrative of Jesus’ time on earth went from point A to point Z, without all of these asides and doubling back which can make it difficult to follow the plot. In the end, though, a linear timeline is less important than the message the Gospel writers are trying to convey. So, even though it can be, (dare I say it), distracting to read scripture in this fashion, let’s put that aside and focus on what this particular passage is trying to tell us.

Jesus has returned to Bethany to the home of his good friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We’re not exactly sure if this particular visit occurs before or after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, but, again, that’s not really important to the point Luke is trying to make, here.

Bethany, in general, and the home of Jesus’ good friends, in particular, must have held a very special place in Jesus’ heart, because he returns here quite often. I get the impression that it was a favorite vacation spot for Jesus; a place where he could go to recharge and refresh, a place where he could take a break from the work he had been called to do.

It seems that Jesus also had a habit of dropping in unannounced, which must have caused a bit of anxiety for Mary, Martha’s and Lazarus’ household. Now, understand, in Jesus’ day, it was incredibly important to offer hospitality to anyone who showed up at your door, expected or unexpected. There were very strict protocols in place about the proper way to greet and treat guests and, if these protocols were not observed to the letter, it was considered to be a major faux pas.

So, when Jesus shows up at Mary, Martha and Lazarus’ house, probably with any number of his disciples in tow, Martha goes into full on hospitality mode. She makes sure that there was water so her guests could wash up, she offers them a comfortable place to sit and relax and then she goes into the kitchen to prepare a meal. Martha knows what’s expected of her, and does her duty, but Mary’s actions are an entirely different story. Instead of helping in the kitchen, as society would have expected and even demanded, Mary plops herself down at Jesus’ feet and, as one commentary puts it, listens to what Jesus says with rapt attention.

I imagine that Martha was the older sister, probably the first born, and maybe even older than Jesus himself. And, as the eldest daughter, it would have been Martha’s responsibility to run the household. Mary, on the other hand, strikes me as a bit of a free spirit, and not too concerned about what was and what wasn’t proper behavior. We’d probably describe Mary, in a modern day context, as hippy-dippy. I imagine, too, that Mary’s pattern of breaking customs and norms was well established and well known to the household, and was a constant source of frustration for her responsible and compliant older sister.

So, Martha is in the kitchen banging pots and pans around, trying to prepare a meal fitting for her honored guests, all the while muttering under her breath about how once again, Mary has flaked out and isn’t helping. “Grrr,” I imagine Martha muttering, “that sister of mine really needs to get off her butt and start helping!” “Who the heck does she think she is!” “How dare she leave me with all the work, again!” Speaking as a somewhat responsible and compliant older brother, I have to say that, in this particular case, I’m on team Martha.

Finally, Martha has had it. She’s fed up with Mary’s unconventional behavior and the constant breach of societal norms. She’s upset that no one is helping prepare the meal and is worried that she’s going to fail as a hostess. She goes back into the living room and does something that must have raised some eyebrows among her guests. In the second half of verse 40, she asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me.” Yikes! Not only is Martha calling her sister out in front of the guests, but she’s also calling Jesus out, basically saying that Jesus needs to insist that Mary get in the kitchen and do her job.

Martha’s outburst is, in and of itself, a breach of hospitality. One would never confront a member of the household or blame a guest in this manner. I imagine it’s only because of the close friendship between Jesus and Martha, that she feels comfortable enough to utter such harsh words. I know, in my case, there are things I’d only dare to say to my closest friends; things I’d never, ever say to people who aren’t close to me, and only because I’m confident the friendship will survive this sort of confrontation. If I wasn’t as confident about the nature of my friendship, as Martha seems to be here, I’d more than likely just keep my mouth shut.

In verses 41 and 42, we hear Jesus’ response: But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, **42**but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Again, yikes! On the surface, this can be seen as a slap down of Martha. It seems that Luke is lifting up the contemplative life, a life of study and learning, over any other sort of activity. The “better” life is a life of prayer and contemplation; the “quiet” life is seen as “more perfect” than the active life. In fact, for centuries, this is how the passage has been interpreted by many biblical scholars.

For some, this narrative reflects an effort within the early Christian community to remove women from the active sphere of service in the church. Sadly, this is reflected in the tendency found in some quarters of the church today to restrict the role of women in ministry, especially in leadership positions. Luke seems to be landing on the side of restrictions, calling Martha from service/ministry to join Mary in the “better part,” a more passive posture, sitting serenely before the Lord, listening in rapt attention. In this interpretation, it seems that Luke is calling for women to stay in “their place” and be subservient to men.

I wonder, though, if these interpretations are missing the point Jesus is trying to make. For me, the key part of these verses is found in the second half of verse 41: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things…”. I think it’s very important to note here that Jesus isn’t going after Busy Martha, instead, he’s speaking to Worried and Distracted Martha. He is speaking to his dear friend who has worked herself into a state of anxious distraction over the meal she wanted to prepare for him.

In this context, we see that Jesus isn’t lifting up one form of service over another, but rather we see Jesus’ concern for overworked, frustrated, and rather angry Martha. An, as you may have guessed by now, I have a few thoughts on the subject.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4, we read that, “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.” And while Paul is specifically speaking of spiritual gifts, I also believe that the gifts of the Spirit include those physical gifts and talents; things that may be considered more mundane.

There are those who are called to share the gift of hospitality; those who can whip up a wonderful meal and set a beautiful table with great ease. There are others who are called to a life of study and contemplation; who look for new ways to think about the nature of the God we all love. Again, Jesus isn’t lifting up, or prioritizing, one set of gifts over another. What I believe is happening here is a call to find a balance between both sets of gifts.

It’s very easy for me to become so distracted trying to make sure that the pan of lemon bars I’m preparing for fellowship time, comes out perfect. (And if you’re hoping for lemon bars this week, I’m sorry to have to disappoint you, maybe next week.) It’s also very easy for me to focus so much on preparing a meaningful sermon or a Bible Study, that I neglect the laundry or let the dishes pile up in the sink.

In today’s prayer of confession, we confessed to the God of both Martha and Mary that there are times when we focus solely on doing and forget to listen. And we also confessed that there are times when we focus only on listening instead of doing. To my way of thinking, we cannot have one without the other, if we are to be true followers of the risen Christ.

Here’s the thing, y’all, God calls us to be both listeners and doers. To focus solely on one, at the expense of the other, misses the whole point. Listening to what God is calling us to do, through the voice of the Holy Spirit, requires us to make time for study and prayer. Once we have an understanding of what God wants from us, then we are called to act on that understanding. We cannot have one without the other and, in fact, one flows into the other. It is impossible to be doers of the word without also being hearers of the word.

The calling to be of service to others, is a noble one. It doesn’t matter if it’s in the kitchen, or at the local food bank, or volunteering at the senior center. The calling to live a life of prayer and study is also a noble one. It doesn’t matter if it’s standing here in the pulpit preaching, or leading Bible Study, or simply sharing the Good News with our community. What matters is that we honor all the gifts that God has given us, to the best of our ability.

We live in a world filled with distractions. Family obligations, hobbies, social media and a whole host of other things can lead us to a place where we lose sight of what God is truly calling us to do. If we find ourselves so focused on preparing that perfect meal or leading the perfect Bible Study, or even preparing that perfect sermon, it’s time to step back and look at the bigger picture. It’s time to refocus on what God has called us to be and do. We serve a God of balance; we serve the God of both Mary and Martha and our job, then, is not to get so distracted by day to day life that we forget to be *both* hearers and doers of God’s word.

AMEN