

January 31, 2021

"Mary & Martha"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 10:38-42

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

A disciple said to his teacher, "Master, I saw a man who could fly." "So?" said the master, "A bird can fly." "Master," said the disciple, "I saw a man who could live underwater." "So?" said the master, "A fish can live underwater." "Master," said the disciple, "I saw a man who in the twinkling of an eye could move from one town to another." "So?" said the master, "Satan can do that as well." But then the master added, "If you are looking to find something truly extraordinary, find a man who can be among people and keep his thoughts on God."¹ Find a man who can be among people and keep his thoughts on God. Yes, since the very beginning, people and the things of this world have distracted us from thinking of God, from listening to God. The fact is, there is a cacophony of voices calling for us to do this or do that; there are a thousand influences in this world pulling us this way or that way. But today's scripture tells us that there is only one, just one, absolute and necessary thing. And that is to listen for that still small voice of God as he imparts to you his peace, his wisdom, his joy, his love.

And today's story of Martha and Mary underscores the importance of this message. St. Luke talks about two sisters, but it's not their similarities, instead it's the differences between Martha and Mary's actions that draw our attention. Jesus has been traveling about the countryside, teaching, healing, ministering to those in need, and he comes to the village of his good friends. Now although this passage doesn't identify it, we know from other scripture, the village is Bethany and it is the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. So, of course, Martha invites him into their home for dinner. This was very much expected in the culture of the times. Showing hospitality to each and every visitor was paramount, and the more unexpected the guest, the more lavish should be the hospitality. So Martha gets to work and begins preparing a feast. Mary, however, decides on a different course of action. She decides to just sit at Jesus' feet, attentive only to him, her eyes and her mind focused solely on the Master, listening to his teaching. And all the while Martha, "was distracted by her many tasks." And you can imagine what that might imply. Can't you see Martha scurrying about the house, planning out the menu, running to the well and getting more water, stopping to pick some flowers for the table, preparing the food, putting out the place settings. Doing all these things while the Lord is in their house. Yet Martha becomes so absorbed in doing her thing, that she isn't listening to anything Jesus is saying! And she becomes so

¹ Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers, by John Shea

stressed by all the many tasks before her that finally, she cries out, “Lord, don't you care!” Don't you care I'm stressed out, don't you care I'm not getting any help from my family, don't you care I'm not getting any help from you! Isn't that cry a familiar one to all of us? Because just like Martha, don't we often cry out to God when stress, anxiety, responsibilities, build up; when it feels like we're being pulled in every direction, and there's no relief in sight, and finally we've had enough and cry out. “Jesus, don't you care!” Yes, it is a familiar cry.

So here we have Martha, rushing around, intent on preparing the feast, and there's Mary sitting quietly, already being fed. The tension finally gets to a point where Jesus has to admonish Martha, saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her.” And what is that better part? Well, it's simply taking the time to stop and be with God, listen to God. Let me ask – was Mary feeling stress and anxiousness, was she worried about dinner not being perfect for Jesus, was she upset and angry at anyone? No. Why? Because Mary was focused on Jesus, giving him her attention, letting him impart to her his peace and wisdom and joy and love. And, my friends, that is an incredible feeling. One which touches your inner heart and soul. I'll bet each and every one of us has experienced that feeling at one time or another. So the obvious question we have to ask is, why is it so difficult for us to do this on a regular basis. Why is it so difficult to sit still and be quiet and let God speak to us? To hear his words to us. Is it because we don't trust God in all the parts of our lives? Is it because we don't know God fully? Or, is it because, as my little story at the beginning implied, that it's just too hard to keep our thoughts on God, among people, among the distractions and things of this world.

Now, it's important for us to note that Jesus doesn't deny the value of what Martha is doing. No, not at all. If not for the Martha's of the world, the world would probably fall apart. What Jesus is saying though, is that Martha has her priorities wrong. Jesus actually said this, not only to Martha, but to all of us once before in his Sermon on the Mount. Remember? He counseled us about being anxious about what we should eat, what we should wear, about our lives. And he gave us this great promise – our heavenly Father knows what we need and will give it to us – if we keep our focus on him. “Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things, all these things, will be given to you.” Martha forgot this. Jesus would probably be happy with just a few herring, a little bread and wine, and some good conversation. Mary is the one who had her priorities in order. She knew the value of sitting at Jesus feet and listening to the Master. Maybe even teaching her something that might change her life.

And I would like to imagine something like that actually did happen! Because the gospel passage immediately preceding Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha's home, is Jesus telling the story of the Good Samaritan to a lawyer who had questioned him. You and I know the story very well. It's one of the most profound teachings in the Bible. Yet every time we hear it, two thousand years later, it still convicts us. But Mary and Martha had never heard it before. Just imagine being Mary and sitting at Jesus' feet as he now shares that wonderful teaching for the very first time with you. As he tells you his two greatest commandments. To love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. As he tells you the significance that God puts on showing compassion and mercy, even to a foreigner, even "to the least of these." You see, that food for the soul was better than any feast that could be prepared by human hands. Yes, I'm sure Mary learned a lot sitting at Jesus feet. And I'm sure you and I could as well. If we only spent the time.

And that's why I think today's scripture teaches us an important lesson. The need for balance in our lives. Think about it. I'm sure we all wish to deepen our faith. To know God more intimately, to feel His presence in our lives, to build a stronger relationship with him. But instead, we stay so busy in our day to day activities, we seldom spend real quality time with him. We don't pray intently like we should, we don't involve him in our daily decisions, we don't sincerely thank him for our many blessings, and we might even go through the day without thinking about him. Like Martha, we're off doing something else, distracted and too busy. And in far too many cases our distractions come by the name of CNN, Fox News, Internet, emails, texts, TikTok, Instagram, Netflix, you name it. We end up wasting our precious time on useless or silly things of this world.

And that's the point Jesus drives home to Martha. He says, "Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things. There is need of only one thing." You see, the truth is, most of those things that take up so much of our time and energy now, won't matter in the end. So Jesus is saying that the most important thing in your life is your relationship with him, with God. Because when you are in a right relationship with Jesus Christ, when you make Him the center of your life, then all the other "things" in your life will be given a new perspective. You will experience how all those other parts of your life fall into place and really do become... well, better, much better. I can't emphasize that enough. When you sit at the feet of the Master, and listen, you will find a calm, a peace, a joy in your life that runs deep and sustains you. You will be fed.

In Psalms we read, “Be still and know that I am God.” And so I encourage you, find the time to be still. Stop trying to outrun, to outwork God, and instead take time to put the Lord first and foremost in your life. Love God with all your heart and mind and soul, and believe me, you will see a transformation. You will see circumstances in your life altered, behavior changed, relationships healed, stress relieved, prayers answered, and so much more.

And what things, what things of this world, could be better than that! Amen