

“Do You Not Care That I am Left to Work Alone?”

Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42

July 21, 2019

The Gospel of Luke is well known for stories about all of God’s children: men, women, and children. As he recounts the parables Jesus tells about the Kingdom of Heaven, Luke includes the story about the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, and the widow who turns her house upside down until she finds the lost coin. Then there is the work of the farmer who plants a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large bush to house the birds, and the woman who uses the tiny portion of yeast to help the bread rise. Today’s story happens to be about two sisters, the familiar one of Martha and Mary. It could just as well be about two brothers. Maybe if James was busy about completing a barn to harvest the crops before the rains came, and John was sitting at the feet of Jesus to garner all the spiritual wisdom he could while Jesus was in their midst. So sisters or brothers, men or women, today’s story has something to say to all of us about what Jesus wants us to learn.

Hear this word from the Lord: ***Luke 10:38-42.***

I appreciate a piece of commentary offered by Mark Davis, who writes: “Left Behind and Loving It.” Martha “welcomed” Jesus and his fellow travelers into the house. The word is used four times in the NT. In addition to here, it describes Zacchaeus when he welcomes Jesus into his house in Luke 19; It describes Jason, who was dragged out with his household by an angry mob for providing hospitality to Paul and Silas; and it describes Rahab’s heroic work in welcoming Israelite spies into her house and enabling these disciples to escape when James looks back at an OT story *to argue that faith without works is dead*. At least in this introductory sentence, Martha’s act of welcoming puts her in good company with those whose hospitality is laudable.

Martha is overwhelmed at serving Jesus and his entourage, including many hungry men. The language of this story amps up the volume a lot. Martha is having what looks like a panic attack. Not one that is rooted in a chemical imbalance or disorder, but one that is evoked by the overwhelming expectations she is facing as the host who is welcoming Jesus and his people. She may be on the verge of losing it. She certainly sees what she is doing as a struggle and she feels completely alone in it. Until we sympathize with the genuine challenge that Martha is facing, the internal ‘riot’ that she is experiencing, then we will only dumb down this story into “Martha, Martha” as a condescending pat on the head. She’s a wreck because she is trying to respond well to what Jesus has put before her. That’s the kind of stormy anxiety that we have to identify with in Martha. I’m not saying that we have to become Martha in all of her anxiety before we can fully appreciate Mary’s sitting. I am saying that we have to appreciate Martha’s position before we critique Martha. She really is panicking about the many things. Jesus does not say that she is irrational or wrong-headed. He merely says that he will not stop Mary from her sitting and hearing.

What I don’t hear is that being busy or serving or getting things done or even rushing from this to that are, in themselves, the problem. The problem is when the distraction of the many take away the ability to capture the one, the good part.

I remember a time when I let myself get immersed so deeply into the “doing,” that I lost sight of the “being.” It was early in my ministry, after a World Communion Service. You know how I love to bring that Service to life with illustrations from all walks of life. In a previous church, I had invited the members to bring graphic images of the many different places they represented, and they responded beautifully. We had a full adorned sanctuary, much like we did here last October.

But for some reason, that I don’t remember, that precious sanctuary needed to be cleaned up immediately after the Service, because something was happening that evening. Everybody seemed to enjoy the Communion experience, but they all went away after it was over. I stayed to clean up all the props, the communion service

pieces, the tapestries, and the extra materials. I was tied up in a knot, because I was quite aggravated that no one had stayed or even offered to help me.

Then - as I was walking down the aisle with the last communion cup, I looked up to the front of the church. There was this beautiful stain glass window of Jesus extending his arms to welcome everyone to come in. I felt an immediate wave of embarrassment, for the gift of life that he gave to us, and my irritation at having to clean up the church.

In the end, Mary has chosen the good part out of the many things by sitting at Jesus' feet and hearing the word. She is entitled to be there and not obligated to leave there – either because of her gender or because of the real, overwhelming work that calls to be done. She has chosen the necessary part. She needs to be there. The response to Martha is evoked by her insistence that Mary likewise be distracted from her choice by the overwhelming anxieties that Martha is carrying.

Martha is the Doer. She goes to get Jesus when their brother is gravely, while Mary sits at her brother's side. Some manuscripts locate her at the foot of the cross, and then also one who goes to anoint his body after his burial. We do well to believe that Martha learns to absorb the wonder of the Spirit of Jesus, too. Keeping a balance of Service and Spirit, action and listening, walking and waiting lead us to spiritual maturity. Martha, and Mary, complement each other as they learn to bring those gifts together.

“Do you not care about me, Jesus?” Of course, Jesus cares about us. We know that is a shallow question, as Jesus cares fully and completely about all of us: young and old, male and female, weak and strong. What Jesus wants us to remember is that we need to find our place in response to his love. We each have gifts, different gifts, and Jesus needs all of us to use all of ourselves. He also needs us to observe times of Sabbath-keeping, allowing our spirits to be fed and invigorated, by whatever tasks, work, or prayed that feed our souls.