

Sermon – July 17, 2022  
Pastor Dan Hollis  
Luke 10:38-42

Thank you both, for your service and your teaching this morning.

When I was choosing from the lectionary options of Scripture readings for this Sunday, I had to ask myself, “Does the world really need another male pastor’s input on the roles of women in the Mary and Martha story?” That’s why I was so grateful to have the opportunity this week to sit down with Reverend Pat and pick her brain on her perspective on today’s reading.

As a bit of a Martha myself in certain contexts, I appreciated hearing her wrestle with a passage that—on first reading—sounds uncharacteristically *critical* of “serving others.” You know, that thing Jesus famously put at, like, the *top* of his list of things to do, throughout his *entire* ministry? And I’m glad this morning to have Pat’s reminder and affirmation for *all* of us that God *does* in fact value your service. In spite of the perhaps triggering use of the word “better” in this passage, Jesus *doesn’t* see Martha as “less-than,” and he doesn’t see acts of service as *inferior* to time spent in worship.

I don’t think it’s acts of *service* that Jesus is being critical of here at all... it’s Martha’s *worry* and *distraction* itself. Jesus is *not* saying, “Don’t help anybody and just sit quietly and listen; *that’s* the right thing to do.”

**No, he’s saying that Martha is letting her anxieties and distractions *control* her... while *Mary* has chosen to let what the Lord has to say to her take their place in her heart. Making the time to find that kind of peace... *that* is a thing we *all* need: Marthas, Marys, and everybody else.**

Let’s look at the actual text. We’re introduced to Martha, who welcomes Jesus into her home, and we’re introduced to Mary, “who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.” In the original Greek, the verb “sat” is used in the “imperfect” tense. Which basically means it’s describing a *continuous* behavior—Mary sat at Jesus’ feet often. In the same way, when the text says “Martha was distracted,” that’s imperfect tense *again*. Martha wasn’t just distracted this *one* time; being “*distracted* by her many tasks” was an ongoing thing for Martha.

Our *instinct* is to read this as, “Jesus came into the house, and Mary sat down to listen and learn from him, but *Martha* went off into the *kitchen* to make the *meal* for everybody, and *that’s* what was wrong with this picture.” But what’s really going on here is bigger than one simple meal.

Let’s look at the words for what Martha was *doing*, which we read in English as “tasks” and “work.” The Greek “*diakonia*” and “*diakoneo*.”

Throughout the book of Luke, those words cover a *wide* range of service—*ministry*, really—from preaching to, *yes*, table preparation, to... collecting famine relief. It's the root of a word we use today: "Deacon," and it's a core element of what Christians call "discipleship."

In this light, when Martha comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the *work* by myself? Tell her then to help me," her complaint isn't limited to just getting *one* meal done in time for her guests of the *moment*. This is a deeper complaint.

"God has a *lot* of work for us that *needs* to be done, and I'm never gonna be able to get it all *finished* if Mary keeps *dropping* everything to sit and listen to *you* all the time."

And Jesus *recognizes* Martha's distress. "Martha, *Martha*, you are worried and distracted by *many* things." In the original Greek text, these words refer to her mental state, not her physical actions. She's agitated and troubled, and not just because of this moment. She's allowed her long-term emotional state to become one of *stress*, so that instead of joyful service, her *work* has become a source of *anxiety*... an anxiety that's making her life—and her faith life—harder.

A lot of us have been *there*.

So I think I have an idea of what Jesus meant when he said, "You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part." The ways we live out our faith will *always* be different from one another; that's not at issue. Martha and Mary will always serve God in different ways, and Jesus never had a *problem* with *that*. But where *Martha* allowed her discipleship to *cause* her such *distress*—to *consume* her and trouble her spirit so—*Mary* on the other hand was... "too blessed to be stressed." *That* was her advantage.

See, focusing your faith life on serving others is, like, a *great* thing. Focusing your life on glorifying God is great *too*. So is spreading the Gospel to the four corners of the Earth, so is building God's church, so is fighting the forces of evil. But in order to do *any* of those things, you *need* one thing. We cannot be good disciples—we can't do the work of God—if we do not take the time that's *necessary* to sit and open our ears to hear the voice of Christ. It's *not* one or the other: sit and listen, or go into the other room and work. That's never been the message of Mary and Martha.

Your spirit *needs* you to remember to take those "Mary moments," in order for you to go and *do* what your spirit is *driving* you to do.

Whether I'm a Martha or any other kind of disciple, my faith life is gonna fall apart around my ears if I don't take the time that's necessary to sit and listen to God.

“Serving others” was never Martha’s mistake. Martha’s mistake was letting her laser-*focus* on her service wear her down and *distract* her from the calming, revitalizing, and inspiring presence of the Lord. Pat was right, God values *whatever* gifts, strengths, and passions you have to offer. *Mary’s* weren’t any better than *Martha’s*. **What Mary did right, what Martha had allowed herself to let fall by the wayside, was to find her center at Jesus’ feet: listening, learning, regenerating her spirit and informing her next actions.**

**All that work *needed* to be done, and *somebody* had to do it, but *taking* the time necessary to *find* that center and listen for God first, *that*—Jesus said—was the better path.**

*That* is the “one thing” in this passage that Jesus said we *all* need. If we live our faith life *remembering* that and *acting* on that... we can do *anything*—even if we have to do it by ourselves—with a clear heart, a calm mind, and endurance to spare. *Even* make dinner for a bunch of hungry boys.

Thanks be to God. Amen.