

Sermon Bytes: Busyness and Better Things

Luke 10:38-41

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Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' [from Luke 10]

Please raise your hand if you have ever left a bed unmade or if you have left the dishes stacked in the sink. Who among you has neglected mowing the yard that one last time in the fall before the frost arrives. Have you ever called the dog over to the table so that you don't have to sweep up the crumbs?

Whenever I read this scripture passage in a service, I can almost see some of the female persuasion stiffen. This story touching more feminist nerves than any other gospel story! Some have heard this story used against women. Some hear the words of Jesus as demeaning the work they consider very valuable. After all, people have to eat, and if somebody doesn't do the work, you know it won't get done by itself. It may be that some women feel they have been labeled as a Mary the lazy or a Martha the control freak when in fact they see themselves as a bit of both. Some with more than a little bit of a gleam in their eye. So why didn't Jesus just ask the disciples the help out

Let's face it: we live in a world where women carry more than their share of the workload. In particular, women are the ones who do the work of taking care of those around them. And they do so much, it just seems unfair to point out they are still getting it wrong. While that too often is the interpretation of this story, that's not point. It is interesting that Luke puts this story right after the one we call The Good Samaritan - a narrative which celebrates the active caring of the Samaritan traveler as opposed to the inattentiveness of the other two passersby.

Then comes this story of Martha and Mary, where the one doing is said to be doing too much, and the one sitting not doing anything is getting a pat on the back. Aren't they saying the opposite of one another? Is Jesus contradicting himself? No I think the point is that life with Christ is rarely an either/or kind of thing. It is more often both/and. Or rather, it is an ebb and flow between the various manifestations of our faith. To say both/and sounds as though we must do everything all the time - the doing and the being- when today's story specifically challenges that idea.

We are human, and generally we can only do one thing at a time if we want to do it well and further more we need from time to time to focus on just being. That's not the way we live much of the time, though, is it? We watch television while eating a family meal; we talk on the phone while working on the computer; we sit in a meeting and make lists

of things we need to do when the meeting is over. And drivers – they are perhaps the worst. we eat and drink and drive. We talk on the phone and drive. Some text – not a good idea. I once saw a fellow reading a book while driving, and a woman putting on her makeup. Now that's double tasking! It's also stupid.

But in our busy, busy world such behaviour is too often applauded. Most of us won't do anything so physically dangerous, but sometimes our doubling or tripling up on things can be dangerous to a balanced life. You know what it's like when you're double tasking on the phone and computer, and your full attention is in neither place. When the kids are getting home from school and want to be with you and you know you have to start cooking the evening meal and the laundry is so backed up you have to do a couple of loads or nobody will have clean underwear the next day. You will probably not have enough attention to go around. The way Luke's gospel arranges these stories, they appear to strike some kind of balance for us. A man walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho must make a decision whether to continue on his way toward whatever business he had there, or to stop and help - a proposition which cost him both money and time. Yet it does not appear as though he struggled with his decision about whether or not to help. He simply did what had to be done.

Martha struggles with what to do. There are competing interests in her story as well. Should she care for the needs of others, or attend to the needs of her own soul? It appears that she is used to taking care of others and leaving herself and her needs for last. The problem with making "doing" our only way of life is that we stop listening for the voice of God. It is easier to do than it is to be still, even for a few moments. And so we just keep moving. Maybe we, like Martha, have forgotten that we have choices to make. She seems to assume that all the work must be done before there is any sitting and listening. But you and I know that all the work is never done.

And of course, we have to mention the gender elements of the story. It was a woman's place to serve the men, not to sit with them and listen to the teacher talk about God. Jesus turned both of these ideas upside down. Of course a woman has the right to sit and listen. and to ask questions and learn. How could it be otherwise in God's kingdom? She is given an equal place at the feet of Jesus. And, please, just let some of the work wait. When was the last time you gave yourself permission to sit and listen. Do you even know what that feels like anymore? So, I'm giving you permission to leave the bed unmade. Okay, maybe not all the time. But once in a while allow yourself to make decisions about what is right for you, about what will remind you of the important things. Allow yourself some time to do the things that take care of others, and also allow yourself to stop doing and just be.

To finish today I want us to look at 3 pictures

When I imagine the encounter between Jesus and Martha, for most of my life I imagine it as Jesus talking and Mary listening, with Martha busy getting ready for supper. But now I imagine it as this second picture shows - Jesus taking time out his teaching with the others who are gathered at his feet, to talk to the hustling bustling Martha. Leave

her be ... For now, she has chosen the better place. In fact – why don't you sit down and join her.

Over and over again the Bible tells of Jesus coming to Martha's Place – near Jerusalem - there to share their hospitality. Martha's work to make her home warm and inviting is noticed and appreciated. Later when Lazarus dies, Jesus comes to both Mary and Martha. Embracing them both, comforting them both And giving back to each of them something they had lost their brother Lazarus. Jesus loved Mary the student. And he loved Martha the servant in the Kingdom of Heaven --- there is lots of room for both