

Sixth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Don't Just Do Something: Sit There!"
Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42
July 16-17, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I'm guessing most of us would have to plead guilty to being "*worried and distracted by many things*" (Luke 10:41), like Martha in today's Gospel. But hey, if you've ever hosted a party, you know there are plenty of details to attend to for everything to go smoothly. As a bit of a Martha myself, I want to defend her, to emphasize this wasn't just "any" guest she'd invited. This was Jesus, whom she and her sister Mary loved dearly and whom they had a pretty good idea was the Messiah [check out John 11]. **Of course** you want everything to be perfect! Table beautifully set, cooking synchronized so everything is done at the same time, served piping hot (or perfectly chilled), drinks replenished.... But Mary is AWOL from the serving scene. She is offering a different kind of hospitality, sitting quietly with their guest, soaking in His every word.

Martha can't **help** but notice her sister is **not** helping. She takes a break from her flurry of activity firmly to ask Jesus to reprimand and redirect her lazybones sibling:

"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." (Luke 10:40c-d)

(Martha doesn't hesitate to boss around even the Lord!) She's not just seeking an extra pair of hands in the kitchen, though. Martha is wanting to pick Mary up by the nape of the neck like a mother cat with a kitten, and relocate her because she is in a space traditionally forbidden to a woman. Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, and that is where a disciple sits to listen to his rabbi. As a woman, Mary is not allowed to be a disciple. But the reality is that Mary **is** a disciple, a follower of everything Jesus has to say, and Martha will be, too.

Jesus, of course, does **not** apologize to Martha for monopolizing Mary's attention, and He does not send Mary scurrying back to the scullery. He confronts and corrects Martha, not Mary:

“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.”
(Luke 10:41-42)

Again: guilty as charged! “Worried and distracted by many things!” Like what?? What are some of the circumstances that, God’s honest truth, worry and distract **us**? *****

The Lord is aware of all of this. The Lord knows each of us inside and out, better than we know ourselves. The Lord knows that many of us suffer from spiritual ADD, that we are totally distractable, endlessly distracted. Our Lord knows we are riddled with worry about things that **have** happened, things we **imagine** are happening, things that **may** happen, things that will probably **never** happen. So He points to Mary, Martha’s sister, as a role model for us. He invites Mary to shimmy over and make room for us on the carpet, at His feet. *“Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”* But what **is** that “better part”? What does Jesus mean? (Jesus doesn’t spell it out exactly, so don’t be afraid your guess will be wrong ☺.) *****

Mary has chosen to sit at Jesus’ feet. Mary **listens** to the Lord. In radio lingo, she is on “receive” not “send.” She is not transmitting; she is receiving. This is the polar opposite of the situation in an old Flip Wilson skit, in which he announces to the audience, “I’m gonna pray now; anyone want anything?”¹ Mary is not approaching Jesus as Santa Claus, the granter of wishes. She honors and embraces Him as the One who reveals the Father’s heart, the Teacher of Kingdom wisdom, the Imparter of Kingdom virtues, the Savior from all that destroys, defiles, derails and distracts us. Jesus **is** the Living Word of God and Mary loves the Word, both Living and written.

This story about Mary & Martha calls us to be more prayer-full. Last week there was a beautiful newspaper column about prayer by Anne Lamott, a wonderful, eloquent, often zany woman of faith who has written 19 books, including *Traveling Mercies* and *Some Assembly*

Required. I think both Martha & Mary would like what she has to say. Here's some of what she wrote:

... Prayer says... I am tiny, helpless, needy, worried, but there's nothing I can do except send my love into that which is so much bigger than me.

How do people like me who believe entirely in science and reason also believe that prayer can heal and restore? Well, I've seen it a thousand times in my own inconsequential life. God seems like a total show-off to me, if perhaps unnecessarily cryptic.

When I pray for all the places where we see Christ crucified – Ukraine, India, the refugee camps – I see in my heart and in the newspaper that goodness draws near, through UNICEF, Doctors Without Borders, volunteers, through motley old us.

I wake up praying. I say a prayer some sober people told me to pray 36 years ago, because when all else fails, follow instructions. It helps me to not fixate on who I am, but on whose. I am God's adorable, aging, self-centered, spaced-out beloved. One man in early sobriety told me that he had come into recovery as a hot-shot but that other sober men helped him work his way up to servant. I pray to be a good servant because I've learned that is the path to happiness. I pray for my family and all my sick friends that they have days of grace and healing, and I end my prayers "Make me ever mindful of the needs of the poor."

Then I put on my glasses, let the dog out to pee and start my day. I will have horrible thoughts about others... [like] someone who has crossed me, whose hair I pray falls out... I say to God, as I do every Sunday in confession: "Look – I think we can both see what we have on our hands here. Help me not be such a pill."

It is miserable to be a hater. I pray to be more like Jesus with his crazy compassion and reckless love. Some days go better than others. I pray to remember that God loves [fill in the name of whoever in the news drives you most crazy] exactly the same as God loves my grandson, because God loves, period. God does not have an app for Not Love. God sees beyond each person's awfulness to each person's needs. God loves them, as is. God is better at this than I am...

I have the theological understanding of a bright 8-year-old, but Jesus says we need to approach life like children, not like cranky know-it-alls, crazily busy clutching our to-do lists. One of my daily prayers is, "Slow me down, Girlfriend." The prayer changes me. It breaks the toxic trance. God says to Moses the first time they meet, "Take off your shoes." Be on the earth. Breathe with me a moment.²

Mary knows enough to sit down and to take off her shoes, to listen and to be in the presence of the Holy. Martha still needs to learn that. But Martha has a lesson to teach us as well.

Right **before** Luke's story about Martha & Mary is the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we heard last week. It's thought that there's a reason the two episodes go back-to-back. The Good Samaritan is about faith-active-in-love, compassion in action, self-sacrificing care for others

without counting the cost to self. The Martha & Mary episode is about the importance of being grounded in prayer **before** we spring into action. It reminds us that the greatest commandment of all is that we should love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and an essential way of showing that love is through worshiping, resisting the siren call of the beach, the sea, the golf course, long enough to join the community in praise and petition, in song and Scripture. This story of Martha & Mary reminds us that we draw energy and inspiration for serving our neighbor through Word & Sacrament. It's through Holy Communion that we are forgiven and receive grace to forgive others: to forgive the ones who seem continually content to be served rather than to serve, the ones who sneer at prayer, the ones who appear to consciously counteract our efforts to help the Kingdom come and God's will to be done.

One Bible scholar cautions us not to "cartoon" the Martha & Mary episode and make caricatures out of them. He basically says we don't want to praise Mary so much she'll sit at Jesus' feet till she's festooned in cobwebs and we don't want to criticize Martha to the point she shuts down the kitchen. We want a happy medium not an extreme on either end. Most of us lean toward being more like one or the other, but we **all** need to be **both** Martha **and** Mary, leading prayer-infused lives of faith active in love.³ Anne Lamott reflects:

We believers march, rally and agitate, putting feet to our prayers. And in our private lives, we pray.

Isn't praying a bit Teletubbies as we face off with the urgent darkness?

Nah.

Amen.

¹Anne Lamott, "I Don't Want to See a Football Coach Praying on the Field," *NY Times* (July 11, 2022), A23.

²Ibid.

³*Luke* (Interpretation), p. 152.

⁴Op. cit., Lamott.

