

“Between Faith & Action”

Luke 10:38-42

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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The story we have just heard about Mary and Martha has traditionally been understood as good news/not-so-good news for women. The good news: Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to what he had to say. In other words, Mary demonstrated that discipleship isn’t limited to men. Women, too, were, and are, disciples. Definitely good news. The not-so-good news: The work of hospitality, typically relegated to women, is of lesser importance to Jesus. Service takes a back seat to discipleship. If that were true, it would, indeed, not be very good news.

So let me be clear. If you remember nothing else that I say today, remember this: That traditional view is a misreading of the story. Or at least the “not-so-good news” part of it is. The good part – women as disciples – *that* stands up under scrutiny. But the devaluing of hospitality and service – that just doesn’t hold up when we look at the whole of scripture.

Take last week, for example. The story immediately before today’s text is the story of the Good Samaritan – a story that shows us that we are called to love our neighbors, ministering to them, serving them, and providing for their needs. Service to others is central to that story.

And Jesus himself taught his disciples that true greatness is found in service: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,” he said. On the night before his death, Jesus knelt to wash his disciples’ feet – an act normally done by the lowest servant – demonstrating that love expresses itself through humble, practical care. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is shown as the Servant-Messiah whose followers learn to serve by watching him. He heals those who suffer; he feeds the hungry; he forgives those wracked with guilt; he moves with compassion toward those in need; he welcomes the marginalized.

And so a reading of today’s text that asks “Are you a Mary (a disciple – good) or a Martha (one who serves – necessary, but less good) makes no sense. That old Mary/Martha dichotomy falls away, I think, when we look more closely. So let’s do that.

We read that Martha welcomed Jesus into her home when he was traveling through her village. It was her home, so she was responsible for providing hospitality. We can’t tell from the text who might have been traveling with Jesus, but it’s likely that he was accompanied by some of his disciples. So there must have been quite a lot for the hostess to do, providing food and shelter and amenities and protection.

Martha’s sister Mary was also in the house, but she wasn’t caring for their visitors alongside her sister as might have been expected. Rather she was sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to him, and letting Martha take care of the business of hospitality on her own. But Martha needed help. Now we might think she simply would have asked her sister to assist her, but that’s not what she did. Perhaps thinking that Jesus’ word would carry more weight than her own, or that it would be rude to interrupt Jesus’ teaching by reaching out directly to Mary for help, Martha instead asked *him* to tell Mary to lend a

hand. But he didn't do that. Instead, he answered her in a way that is often understood (wrongly, as I see it) as dismissive of her.

"Martha, Martha," he said, "you are worried and distracted by many things."

Now I ask you: Does that sound as though he is being dismissive of Martha's efforts to provide hospitality? Does that sound like criticism? Is Jesus putting Martha down? I don't think so. What I hear in his response to her request for help is compassion. The rhetorical device of her repeated name – "Martha, Martha" – suggests love and care, not criticism. And what did he focus on? Did he say, "Martha, you are just too busy fixing dinner and sweeping the floors and making the beds"? No. There is no word of criticism of her hospitality in his response. But there *is* concern about her mental state. "You are worried and distracted by *many things*", he said. And he continued: "There is need of only *one thing*. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Many things – one thing: That is, I think, the crux of this text. Martha seems to have lost focus in her efforts to provide hospitality to Jesus. And we know how that goes, don't we? Our own lives are often distracted by all we are expected to do. And worry? There are so many reasons to worry, from war in the Middle East, to a deadline at work, to a rift in a family, to the high price of groceries. We, like Martha, worry. We wish it weren't so, of course. We sense that something is wrong. We don't like the overwhelmed feeling we often have because of the many demands on us – not just in our personal lives, but even in the life of the church. We don't like the knot in our stomach that accompanies our worries. We are, indeed, worried and distracted much of the time.

But our busy and distracted and worried lives get in the way of our ability to be present in the now. We multitask in an effort to check off more items on our to-do list, but find that doing so drains our energy and actually makes us less efficient. Our constant busyness may keep our worries at bay, but it also keeps our focus off the things in us that need to be healed, and the people around us who need our presence. When we are distracted by so many demands, we have less room for reflection – less room for empathy – less room to notice the needs of others. When every moment is filled with activity, there is no room for prayer, for rest, or for creativity. When every moment is filled with action, it's easy to forget why we do what we do. A busy, noisy life keeps us from knowing who we are and who God is inviting us to become.

In a world that trains us to hurry, to multitask, to fill every quiet moment with noise, Jesus calls us back to the one necessary thing: presence. Not perfection. Not productivity. Presence. In a culture that pulls us in a dozen directions at once, Jesus speaks our name the way he spoke Martha's—gently, lovingly, and with compassion — and invites us to sit, to breathe, to listen. Not because our work doesn't matter, but because we cannot serve well when our souls are scattered and our hearts are heavy with worry. The gospel does not ask us to do more; it asks us to be grounded, so that our doing flows from love.

We've all heard the expression "Don't just sit there: Do something." The lesson from today's Gospel is just the opposite. "Don't just do something – sit there." Jesus invites us to presence, to focus, to mindfulness. Somehow, when we focus on what we know to be good and just and true, our worries are transformed into compassion and faithful service. In this Lenten season – a time of repentance, reflection, and renewal –

may we set aside the myriad of distractions around us in order to be more attentive to the divine. How do we do that? It takes practice. Perhaps meditation and prayer is the way you focus; maybe it's yoga; perhaps it's reading scripture; maybe it's letting music surround you. But what better time is there than now to develop contemplative practices that focus our lives, and our actions, on what really matters – love itself, made manifest in the life-giving way and Spirit of Jesus.

Let the church say, Amen.