

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 17, 2022 – 6 Pentecost
Luke 10:38-42 – Mary and Martha
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Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem where Jesus will be crucified, and his disciples will be left without their teacher and leader. The journey takes a long time, and Jesus has the opportunity to teach a number of lessons about what it means to follow him on his way. Many of his “teaching moments” were committed to memory by his disciples. These lessons were passed on orally for the instruction of people who did not know Jesus themselves. They were then recorded in written form, and we find them in the New Testament, especially in the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

This morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke is brief but full of instruction. Three characters: Martha, Mary, and Jesus. Martha and Mary are sisters, and they have a brother named Lazarus. They are from Bethany, a town just east of Jerusalem. We are probably most familiar with this family from the gospel account of Lazarus, who was ill and died and was brought back to life by Jesus. They were all close friends of Jesus.

Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. Mary was there, too. We don't know if Mary lived with her sister or was visiting. Martha was busy with “many tasks.” In the Greek text this is literally “much serving.” It seems reasonable to think that Martha was preparing food to serve her guest. Perhaps she was taking extra trouble over the meal because Jesus was a close friend and a rabbi, or teacher. Martha was acting as the host. Mary, by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him, was acting as a pupil or disciple.

We may find it very easy to put ourselves in Martha's place. She was in her own home, working to be a good host, and she was annoyed that her sister wasn't helping. So, she complained to Jesus and asked him to set Mary straight. But her request backfired. Instead of rebuking Mary, Jesus commends her behavior. “Martha, Martha” – I imagine Jesus saying her name with affection and concern – “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.”

There is a long tradition of interpretation of this passage which looks at Martha as a representative of the active life and Mary as a representative of the contemplative life. Jesus' words are taken to mean that a life of study and prayer is superior to an active life in the world. Many women, in particular, are offended by this interpretation and say, in effect, “that sounds well and good, but if it weren't for Martha, no one would have had any dinner.” I don't find this traditional interpretation to be very helpful.

Remember the context of this encounter. Jesus is very aware that time is precious. His opportunities to instruct his disciples are limited. Jesus says to Martha, “You are worried and distracted by many things.” Mary is attentive to Jesus, listening to his teaching. Martha is worried and distracted, so she is not attentive to Jesus. He commends Mary's choice. She embraced her opportunity to devote her mind to Jesus while there was still time.

We all lead active lives in the world, not contemplative lives in a convent or monastery. As followers of Jesus, this morning's lesson challenges us to examine our lives in terms of how we are spending our precious time and in terms of our focus – on Jesus and God's kingdom or

on our worries and the distractions of the world. As Christian people this is not a matter of efficient time management. This is a matter of spiritual discipline and spiritual growth. How do we spend our precious time? Everyone talks about being busy, as if that automatically “explains” not having enough time to do important things. The questions to ask ourselves are “What am I busy doing?” and “How am I choosing to spend my time?”

Think of yesterday. Each of us spent 24 hours doing things. Can you examine your day and ask yourself if you wasted any time? Watching television, talking on the phone, shopping for something you didn't need, reading, driving somewhere you didn't need to go, spending unnecessary time on the computer or social media? I'm not talking about taking time for real, restorative leisure activities. We need Sabbath rest in our active lives. I'm talking about activities you wouldn't choose to do with your time if you could live the day over again

Much of our time is spent in the necessary tasks of daily living. We must shop, cook and eat, shower, do laundry, keep house, care for our families, pets and gardens, and work to earn a living or to contribute to important volunteer efforts. How can we do what we need to do and also focus on Jesus and God's kingdom? How can we be Martha and Mary at the same time?

We can develop the habit of mind to say the name of Jesus or pray for others or thank God for our blessings during routine tasks. We are thinking all the time, aren't we? Are you worrying while you shower? Try praying about what you are worrying about. Or say a prayer you know by heart, perhaps the Lord's Prayer. Do you find yourself hurrying through your daily chores, mind spinning? Breathe slowly, saying “Jesus” as you inhale and “is Lord” as you exhale, or “Jesus, have mercy.” Are you impatient with that slow woman ahead of you in line at the grocery store? Try seeing her as God's beloved child, with eyes of compassion, and pray for her. There are many ways we can make ordinary time sacred time.

Now think of yesterday once again. How much time did you spend focused on Jesus and God's kingdom? Did you pray or engage in another spiritual practice? Did you do any works of mercy, loving your neighbor as yourself? Did you intend to write an encouraging email to someone or visit or phone someone but “didn't have the time”? Was there something you could have done to support your own health and well-being that was crowded out of your schedule by the distraction of many things? Was there a way you might have grown in love?

Martha and Mary were both friends and disciples of Jesus. They loved him and Jesus loved them. It was out of love that Jesus said to busy and irritable Martha, “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” Learning from Jesus, hearing God's word, loving God and finding God.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees – religious leaders of his day – for burdening the people with laws and restrictions. He said, “Woe ... to you! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them” (Luke 11:46). In contrast to this approach to religious practice, Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

The worries and distractions of our daily lives pass. The days of our lives pass. But God does not pass away. May each of us reflect on today's gospel message and take steps to re-orient our lives to God, from whom we came and to whom we go. All for love. In Jesus' name. Amen.