

Martha, Martha

I just got back from vacation, and as is the case with many people, this return meant that I had a lot to catch up on and a lot to deal with. There was lots of mail to sort, I had to unpack and do laundry, there were calls to return. I had to start writing this sermon!

On my first night back, I found myself making dinner, unpacking, and updating my calendar all at the same time. It was quiet in my house so I had a TV show going in the background.

The next day the unpacking was still not finished, my calendar was still a mess, and I could not remember the plot of the show I had watched the night before. So I had virtually the same to-do list and added returning calls and emails and did those at the same time I was preparing for a meeting and making three different to-do lists.

By the third day, I still had unpacking to do, which was going slowly because I had either TV or radio or a phone call going at the same time. It felt efficient, though, because I was doing a lot. I made a much-needed trip to the grocery store and while I was putting things from the shelves into my cart had a text conversation with my daughter and another with my husband. All while trying to remember my grocery list.

By day four, I found myself staring at my laptop, wondering what to say about poor distracted Martha with her many anxiety-provoking tasks. The irony did not escape me.

The story of Mary and Martha has been used to juxtapose study and churchgoing against action and service; it has been used to denigrate the work of women generally and in the church specifically. Yet there is so much in this story to counter those interpretations and so much that points to important lessons for those of us who are disciples of Jesus today.

First of all, it is important to notice that the reason Jesus is teaching in Martha's house is because Martha welcomed him. And in her culture and time, to welcome someone into your home meant you would provide hospitality for them, food and other comforts.

And second, if you look at what Jesus and his friends were doing at Martha's house and compare it to later stories of the early church, you can see that she and Mary are, in fact, hosting a house church. This gathering sounds a lot like those described in Acts and in Paul's letters.

What Martha was doing with her energy and time was important and probably a lot more than serving food. In fact, in the original Greek, this story uses the term *diakonos*, which means service and is the root of our word "deacon." So what Martha was doing was a kind of ministry, a particular kind of service

So, if Martha is doing important work to support this house church and the ministry of Jesus, what is the problem? You'll notice that Jesus doesn't rebuke Martha, but he does recognize her struggle. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

The problem seems to be that Martha has lost her focus.

Like many of us, Martha is distracted. She has a lot to do and she's trying to get it done in the most efficient way possible, trying to make everyone happy, to meet all their needs. Even the most spiritually focused among us fall prey to having our attention diverted or pulled in a thousand directions. Who among us has not tried to have a productive phone conversation while driving? Or read a news article while cooking? Checked emails during a pause in a meeting?

When you multitask or become anxious over a too-long to-do list, you can easily forget why you are doing what you are doing. The meaning of your work, of your actions, gets lost.

And this is what Jesus notices about Martha. Not that she has made a bad choice or that her work is unimportant. For goodness sake, Martha's hospitality is what made it possible for Mary to sit at Jesus' feet in the first place!

Jesus doesn't reprimand Martha, he comforts her. He re-orientes her. And here I return to the Greek, because in the Greek Jesus doesn't say that Mary has chosen the "better part." In Greek, the original language of this story, Jesus says that Mary has chosen the good.

So Jesus is not telling Martha that he prefers one type of ministry or spirituality over another, he is telling her that one kind of ministry doesn't come at the expense of another.

Service to others doesn't come at the expense of worship and teaching. And likewise, worship and teaching don't come at the expense of service. Our work in the world is informed by our worship and what we learn at the feet of Jesus. And we also carry our work in the world into our prayers and teaching.

After I removed a few distractions and focused on this story, I began to wonder if it is just about two sisters. Perhaps it is also a story about two sides of the church, two types of spirituality that are best kept in partnership.

What if, instead of each of us being a Mary **or** a Martha, we are each a little of both? And what if St. Mark's as a whole is a little of both?

Like the house church of Martha and Mary, we are a community that worships and learns about the word of God. And we are also a community that offers hospitality and service to each other and our neighbors. And we know from the Gospels that Jesus

doesn't prefer one of these modes of being church over the other. We see in his ministry and the earliest days of the church that they belong together.

Sometimes we get too caught up in one aspect of our Christian life so that the other aspects of it are neglected. Things get unbalanced. We have a connection with Christ that we don't carry with us into the world, or we have a connection to the needs of the world that we don't carry with us to our worship.

Perhaps the opposite happens, instead of focusing too much on one thing we are distracted by too many things. And all of those things, important as they are, create anxiety that causes us to lose our focus.

In either case, Jesus notices our struggle and wants to alleviate our anxiety. He re-orientes our attention. He reminds us that there are many forms of devotion, but only one focus of devotion. Understanding this need for balance can give new motivation and inspiration for both our prayers and our service.

In our time, we live with daily distraction. We are almost expected to do too much, to do too many things at once. Scientists can explain to us why this constant multitasking is unproductive and bad for us, but as your pastor, I want to recognize that is it also stressful and causes anxiety. Living this way, we often make checking things off our multi-task list an end in itself - even if the things on the list are really important.

But our purpose is not found on a list. Our purpose comes from God and God's mission. When things become overwhelming, Jesus invites us to take a break and remember the focus of all our work and learning and worship - it is God.

One of the things we offer each Sunday here is a chance to get the kind of re-orientation Jesus offered to Martha. Here you can find or remember the connection between Scripture and ministry, between the breakfast we serve between services and the communion we share at this table.

Martha and Mary were both faithful disciples of Jesus. Jesus invites us to learn from them how to engage in learning, worship, fellowship, hospitality, and service that stays focused on him.

Amen.