

“Permission to Say No”

A Sermon for Every Sunday, July 21, 2019

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Luke 10:38-42

The story of Mary and Martha has always made me smile. I grew up with two sisters. We had to wash the dishes by hand. We would typically argue over whose turn it was. This would embarrass and sometimes anger my mother. I imagine that even if Jesus Christ Himself were over for dinner, we would be in the kitchen arguing over whose turn it was to wash, who had to try and who had the night off. My mother would have been so angry if we had asked Jesus to settle the argument!

Today’s gospel lesson is actually not about pitting Mary and Martha against each other. They were both faithful servants and friends of Jesus. He came to their home with the other disciples and Martha stayed busy with preparations while Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to him. This passage is not as much about two sisters arguing as it is about being distracted from the one important thing that is right in front of you. Martha is so busy worrying about how the meal will turn out and who will do what that she forgets she has Jesus Christ himself over for dinner.

In this day and age, we know all too well about being worried and distracted because we have too much to do. We’re busy. That is what we say all the time. “Hi, how are you? How have you been? Oh, I’ve been so busy, my family is soooo busy.” Is it a badge of honor to have something to do all the time? Does it make us feel important? It is almost as if it has become normal to stay busy and distracted from morning until night.

Henry David Thoreau said, “It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?” Think for a minute about the very most important things in your life. What are they? Do you spend most of your time on the things that are the most important?

I saw a very little boy and his dad at McDonald’s the other day. His dad was on his phone arranging meetings for work. The boy was left to his own devices. I was thinking how nice it would be for that young dad if he just turned off his phone and let himself enjoy some time with his son.

Have you ever had the experience of trying to talk to someone and they are too distracted to really listen to you? Have you ever been the person so distracted by your many tasks that you can’t concentrate on the one important thing that is right in front of you?

Golda Meir once talked about how hard it can be to concentrate on one thing and not be worried and distracted. She said, “At work, you think of the children you have left at home. At home, you think of the work you have left unfinished. Your heart is torn.”

She is right. If you are thinking about work when you are home and thinking about home when you are at work...you can’t enjoy any aspect of your life.

Part of the lesson of this story about Jesus is that worry does not do any good at all. Doing your best to be fully present in the moment is the way to live a rich life. Worry will suck the joy out of any situation. It is hard not to worry, but Jesus asks us “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to the span of your life?”

Martha is so worried and distracted that she can't concentrate on what is the most important thing. Hearing what Jesus has to say during his short time on earth is the main thing at that moment. Maybe the meal can wait.

This text has always been a problem for Christians. Sometimes it makes people mad. Someone really did have to fix the dinner that day for Jesus and the disciples. If everyone just sat at his feet and listened, who would cook? The dinner was not going to cook itself! Things have to get done. Didn't Jesus know that?

I think Jesus **did** know that. I think Jesus was very much in favor of offering hospitality. The gospel lesson from last week was the good Samaritan story. Jesus was trying to show how very important it is to take care of others. He was not saying you shouldn't fix dinner or do chores. He wasn't saying that quiet contemplation at his feet should take the place of serving others.

I was at a pastors' Bible study where a group of us studied this passage. We talked about how much the church needs both people like Mary and people like Martha. We decided you need a balance. Then we reread the text. It doesn't say that. As much as we wanted it to say that, it just doesn't. It says "Martha, Martha," you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only **one**. "

This story is not about balance. It is not about moderation or doing enough. You are not being called a balanced life. You are being asked to show a single minded, intense, unbalanced devotion to the Lord. You are called to sit at his feet and listen to him and to go out and be his eyes and lips and hands in the world. You are called to do it not out of a sense of duty, but out of an abundance of love and joy and gratitude.

It turns out, Martha had a problem on that day. On that one day her problem was not that she was cooking instead of sitting at Jesus' feet, it was her attitude about it. She was saying something like, I am so busy, and I **have** to cook for Jesus. What she could have said was, of all the things in the world there are to do today, I **get** to cook for Jesus! Or, she could have said, I will leave all this and sit at Jesus feet and listen to him. I will worry more about my spirit than someone else's dinner.

Jesus said there is only one thing that is needed. Mary chose it and it won't be taken from her. He didn't say what the one thing was. Why didn't he say what it was?

He didn't say it in this passage, but he said it in the passage right before this one. The one from last week. A lawyer came to Jesus and asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life? He said the one thing is to love your lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself. That is the one thing.

This story is not about adding one **more** thing for you to worry about. It is about encouraging you to concentrate your life and your attention on what is truly important. This story is not about judgment. It is about grace. You are being given permission to say no. If you are going to choose to be devoted to Christ and spend time with him, you are going to have to say no to other things sometimes. Maybe it will be no to keeping your house perfect or no to staying late at work or no to heading up that extra project. Maybe it will mean saying no to Sunday soccer practice or travel hockey. You are being given permission to choose the better portion and relax at the feet of the Lord.

I have been a pastor for about 10 years now. Part of my job is to sit with people while they die. You would think that this would be hard, but it is a holy privilege to hear people reflect on their lives and think about eternity. I can honestly tell you that no one has ever told me on their death bed that they regret having left some dirty dishes in the sink. No one has ever said, Pastor Judy, I wish I would have worked more or went to more boring meetings. No one has ever told me they wished they would have spent more time on social media or watching television.

I have had people tell me they wish they had spent more time with family and friends and more time in the house of the Lord.

The story of Mary and Martha is **our** story. It is the story of choosing between being worried and distracted by a million different things or saying no to worry and distraction so we can sit at the feet of the Lord. Mary chose the better portion that day. We can too! The Lord's promise to you is the same as his promise to Mary. It is okay for you to say no to the world sometimes and choose the better portion. You deserve to sit at Jesus feet. That is a choice you are allowed to make, and it will not be taken away from you.

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