

Doing Something

Luke 10:38-42

6 Pentecost 2019
July 21, 2019

Just a show of hands – how many of y’all think Martha got a raw deal in today’s Gospel. After all, she was just trying to do the right thing: be a gracious host, prepare the appetizer, serve the drinks, and welcome the guests. Hospitality was highly valued in biblical times. Abraham’s lavish hospitality to three strangers was probably not an exaggerated gesture. St. Paul even instructs the young church to continue the tradition, “**Contribute to the needs of the saints,**” writes Paul, and “**extend hospitality to strangers.**” (Rom. 12:13)

Martha is only doing what she believes is expected of her. Then there’s Mary, seemingly parked in the middle of the floor, without a care in the world, leaving her poor sister to do all the work and wash the dishes when they’re done. I’ve got a sister like that and excuse me, but I’m with Martha all the way on this one. Of course, she is distracted and irritated. Wouldn’t you be?

The first readers of this Gospel certainly would side with Martha. In Jesus’ day there were very well fixed and commonly understood standards of behavior for all members of society. Women in the household, for example, were expected to be servers. It was a matter of honor. When you had a distinguished guest, like a rabbi, visit your house, you pulled out all the stops, laid out the best china, uncorked the best wine, found the cloth napkins with the little wooden rings. Martha was doing the right thing, in accordance with all the expectations of her culture, class, and gender. For the most part, we are just like her, regardless of our sex or age.

Doing the right thing is part of our culture, too. We may not always know what exactly the “**right thing**” to do is in any given situation, but, by golly, we will “**do**” something. In fact, the main emphasis in life is doing something. We hear from the time we were little kids, watching cartoons on Saturday morning, “**What-sa matter with you? It’s a perfectly nice day outside** (it may be 30 below and snowing 14 inches an hour, but it’s a perfectly nice day outside). **Don’t just sit there, do something.**” We learn this stuff. For we children of the 20th century, “**doing**” is the fundamental moral good. Doing nothing, however, or doing what appears to be nothing, is the primal sin – even when we’re retired and entitled to do nothing. You ever wonder why vacations are often such a physical and spiritual disaster? We work like crazy to prepare to get away from working like crazy and when we finally escape, we feel like we need to be doing something all the time or we’ll go crazy. We naturally side with Martha because while Martha feels compelled to do the right thing, Mary appears to be doing nothing.

Though many of us identify with Martha, one could conclude that Mary is the hero of this story. Go figure! That’s the gospel for you. Though she says not one word during this entire episode, Jesus says of her that she has “**chosen the better part,**” that is to sit at the feet and Jesus, her teacher, and listen to him. But, to pit Mary against Martha, applauding the one and shaming the other does injustice to both this story and the gospel Mary is listening to.

The text is subtle here, so permit me to explain. First, Jesus’ double calling of Martha’s name is a gesture of love, rather than chastisement. It’s like, “**Martha, Martha, dear one to my heart,**” not “**Martha, Martha, will you puleeze get over yourself.**” He knows that Martha is acting out of what culture, tradition, and faith require of her, to be the consummate host, to attend to Jesus needs, where Mary is attending to his words. What he says, in the Greek of the New Testament is you are “**peristayomai.**” Literally, you are being “**dragged away**” by expectations, prevented from joining with your sister, which is what you want to do, and pulled away by what

you feel you must do. Jesus is not so much criticizing Martha, who wants Mary to join her in serving, as much as inviting Martha to join Mary in listening.

Placing this episode in the larger narrative context of Luke's gospel, Jesus is on the road, heading for Jerusalem and the last days of his public ministry. Time is critical. What little of it there remains needs to be devoted to what God told the disciples on the Mt. of Transfiguration, **"Listen to him."** Don't be distracted or dragged away by competing, although important, other priorities. The time is short. The time is now. Listen to him.

But, it's so easy to get distracted – dragged away by the constant wrangling over what President Trump tweets and what his critics trumpets back. Distractions! There's real stuff happening in the world, important stuff. At this writing, Hurricane Barry is still taking destructive aim on Louisiana, while draught continues to ravage southern Ethiopia and Kenya. Five mass shootings from Chicago to Lubbock, Texas, in just the past week!. Not far from here, the controversial shooting of a Black citizen by a White police officer in South Bend, Indiana, is prompting community protests and exacerbating racial tensions in that city. You can't just ignore these things – right? Somebody should do something? Right?

Closer to home, I know some of what troubles families in this congregation. Health concerns, death of friends and loved ones, financial anxiety, children, parents. It's a complex world we now live in a world that pits competing priorities in our lives against each other. Sometimes we feel literally torn, **"dragged,"** to use the Gospel term, by these competing claims on our time, our energy, and our spirits. There is the constant, pressing feeling that we need to do something, anything. It's baked into us by culture and pre-disposition. When we are feeling most overwhelmed and most distracted by all that we are trying to do, the ironic compulsion is to do more. Don't you feel that? I do. Here's the real kicker. When things go wrong, when life situations are manifestly out of our control, the almost universal self-judgment is that we did not do enough. I am reminded of a bumper sticker that is a good summary of today's Gospel text. It reads, **"Don't just do something – sit there!"**

Not bad advice. We need a word of good news from Jesus. It's not hard. Listen to him. "Have no fear little flock." When we need a word of patience and discernment, listen to him. In the midst of all the heated political rhetoric, we need a word of wisdom, forgiveness, and hope. Listen to him. All the gospel asks of us is to listen to Jesus.

Contrary to our perceptions, Mary is not just an inconsiderate slacker in this story. The difference between Martha and Mary might be described as the difference between tending and attending. Martha is so busy tending to the task of hospitality, which she assumes is expected of her, that she is unable to attend to what Jesus is saying and doing. Mary, on the other hand, is attending to Jesus. Assuming the posture of a disciple, sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to what he is saying, she attends to him. What Mary discerns and, hopefully, what Martha will discover, is that Jesus is the real host in this scene. It is his hospitality that welcomes Mary into the role of disciple and invites Martha to do likewise. At his feet, Mary hears the words of hope and promise that we have come to call **"The Good News."** She hears an invitation to give over her whole life to Jesus, whom Paul calls **"the fullness of God through whom God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things."** She hears that the rule of God is already in play and that hope is not futile. She hears that chaos and mourning and death shall not have the last word about us. She hears that God has the whole world in his hands and there are no boundaries. When we seek God, we will find the one thing that sets in order all the other things we could and should do in life. It comes to us as a gift. We don't have to do anything to get it. There is nothing we can do to deserve it. We simply discover that Jesus is the host and we are his guests right here in this place.

A centering prayer that I learned from a Catholic nun who was once on staff with our synod. It's taken from Psalm 46. It begins, "Be still and know that I am God." Say it with me – Be still and know that I am God. Let the words settle into you. Say the verse again, but leave off the last word. Be still and know that I am. With each repetition, leave off one more word.

Be still and know that I
Be still and know that
Be still and know
Be still
Be

Amen