

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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July 17, 2016
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 10:38-42

Disciples: Workers and Hearers

The story of Jesus with his friends, Martha and Mary, is a special one for a number of reasons. For one, it's a pleasant reminder of one of the human characteristics that Jesus displayed—that of having friends. Now don't get me wrong, Jesus is a friend and can be a friend to all who want to follow him to this very day. Hymns like, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," point to this truth. In many places in the gospels, Jesus refers to his followers as his friends.

In the case of Martha and Mary, the friendship described is less global and more intimate. In this case, these friends, he visited in one of their homes. So much of the narrative we have about Jesus has him on the move, from one place to the next, rarely spending any meaningful amount of time in one place—at least worth mentioning. But here, in this case, we have Jesus stopping by the home of his friend named Martha.

Another notable part of this story that makes it special is that it is about 2 women who are among Jesus' closest followers. In the patriarchal time in which Jesus lived, and the patriarchal perspective from which the gospels are written, the very fact that this story is included points to the importance of women in the early company of Jesus' followers. That Jesus relates to them on a one-to-one personal basis speaks to his understanding of the full inclusion of women in the community of faith. They are included as examples to which he points as he interacts with them.

The third aspect of this story that makes it special is the message that is conveyed as we consider how it is that we're called to follow Jesus in our day with the contrast of these 2 friends of Jesus. It's this contrast, by the way, that is often over-simplified that sticks in the minds of those who have encountered this story over the years.

This over-simplification suggests that in the persons of Martha, and her sister, Mary, we have presented 2 competing ways of being. Martha is the worker bee who is overly concerned about the work that is to be done around whatever the task at hand is. Mary, in contrast, is the one portrayed as the contemplative student eager to learn, who can't be bothered by the work to be done when there is devotion and learning to be had. In their caricatures, they are polar opposites when it comes to relating to Jesus.

The problem here is that these caricatures that exacerbate these characteristics make these 2 women sort of limited and 2-dimensional. So let's take a closer look to see if one is preferable to the other, or whether there is something in both of them to glean in the way of better understanding what it means to follow Jesus.

We'll start with Martha since that's who's mentioned first. It's Martha's home to which Jesus has come for a visit. Sometimes it has been suggested that it was Martha's and Mary's house together. But there is nothing in the text to actually suggest that. It merely mentions that it's Martha's home into which she welcomed Jesus.

In the culture of that time and place, hospitality for visitors and guests was one of the highest priorities in civil living. Hospitality was more than just being kind and pleasant to visitors. It included much more than that. Hospitality included the provision of refuge and safety. To welcome another into one's home meant providing the same level of security as was provided for all in the household. It included providing for the sustenance of food and hygiene. In a nutshell, it was a big deal to provide the full measure of hospitality when a guest was welcomed into one's home.

It was no exaggeration then to read in the text that Martha had “many tasks” to attend to in the providing hospitality to Jesus. Sometimes that caricature of Martha that I mentioned earlier suggests that Martha was a busybody who was making more work for herself than was necessary or expected. I’d argue that that’s not the case. Rather Martha was consumed with many tasks in order to be a responsible host to her guest.

In sharp contrast to Martha is her sister Mary who is the third person in this story. What we read about Mary is that she was seated at Jesus’ feet, listening to what he was saying. To be seated at Jesus’ feet is the posture of one who is a disciple. So this description of Mary is a strong affirmation of her role as a female disciple of Jesus who was presenting herself as one eager to learn everything she could from her teacher Jesus.

That’s really all that is said about Mary in the words on the page. But there’s more that’s implied, when reading between the lines. And the most obvious is that as Martha’s sister, she is doing nothing to assist or help out with the all-important hospitality that was expected of Martha and due Jesus as a guest in Martha’s home. The contrast between the 2 sisters could not be more stark.

So the picture is pretty clear as described by the gospel writer. Jesus is in Martha’s home along with Martha’s sister Mary. Mary is seated at the feet of Jesus listening to what he was saying while Martha is scurrying around with the tasks of hospitality.

So the scene is set for the brief dialog that ensues. And we read, “But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’” (Lk. 10:40)

At first reading this almost sounds like Martha is complaining to her parent that her sister isn’t helping her around the house. It’s like she is telling on her sister in hopes that she will be reprimanded. And isn’t that what the caricature of Martha has us believing about what is going on here? Martha is appealing to a higher authority (in this case the highest authority that there is!) to get some justice.

The response of Jesus to Martha’s complaint seems to suggest that Mary isn’t in the wrong here, but rather perhaps Martha is. He responds, “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.” (Lk. 10:41)

Any of us who grew up with siblings or any of us who are in the process of raising siblings, may immediately jump to the conclusion that Jesus has rejected Martha’s complaint and has sided with Mary. And jumping to this conclusion would suggest that the tasks of hospitality that were consuming Martha are unimportant—or at least relatively unimportant compared to Mary’s devotion. But I don’t think that’s what Jesus was saying. Jesus was not undermining the cultural importance and priority on the offering of hospitality.

So if it’s not a simple choosing of sides between Martha and Mary, what is it that Jesus is saying here?

Well, it’s in the words Jesus chooses to say in his answer to Martha that is key to understanding his response. And, I believe they provide some sharp words of warning to us in our current day.

For what is Jesus reprimanding Martha? It is not the many tasks of hospitality in which she was engaged. Listen carefully to what Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, you are *worried* and *distracted* by many things. . . .”

Worried and distracted are the words that Jesus uses. In fact in the verse before we find the same word. "But Martha was *distracted* by her many tasks; . . ."

It's not her work. It's not her scurrying around. It's not her fulfilling the cultural expectation of providing hospitality. It's none of that. Rather it's her worry and distraction that Jesus is calling out.

Martha had become distracted from what was most important. And in that distraction and worry she lost her way in keeping her faith-focus sharp and clear.

Jesus was not acting ungrateful for the hospitality that Martha was providing. Nor was he suggesting that such hospitality was unimportant. As a traveler on his way, he was surely grateful for the hospitality.

Distraction, and distraction that leads to worry, are powerful forces that can really get us off track can't they? It's just not in Jesus' day that distraction and worry can get the best of us. It's something for us to be on guard against today as well.

This summer, there have been a series of horrific events in our country and indeed around the world that have become particularly distracting and worrisome: the recent massacre of Bastille Day revelers in Nice, France; the attempted military coup in Istanbul, Turkey; the massacre of Dallas police officers; and the seemingly disproportionate killing of people of color by police. All of these horrifying events have captured our attention as a nation, and for some have induced a social paralysis. Add to this all of the rhetoric that is being flung about by candidates for political office, all of whom know how to finesse our fears so as to motivate us toward a particular political solution.

My friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, the counsel that Jesus gave Martha is the counsel for us today as we find ourselves becoming numb and retreating in the face of the events in today's world. We, like Mary, must choose the better part in our devotion to God and in our Christian discipleship. If ever there was a time for us to boldly declare our Christian communique of God's love given to the world in Jesus, that time is surely now.

As Christians we are people of hope and encouragement. We must resist the forces that lead to distraction and worry. We must choose the better part, which by the way Jesus says, "will not be taken away."

Each one of us can be a force for positive change in response to the debilitating destruction that is around us. Together, as disciples of Jesus, working side by side under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we can be that counterbalance for good that overcomes the bad.

Distraction and worry must be kept at bay. Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount talked about the paralyzing and therefore destructive force of worry. He asks rhetorically, "And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (Mt. 6:27)

May we, like Mary and Martha, be disciples of Jesus in our world today so that in the midst of distracting worry and despair, we can be instruments of hope and encouragement.