

Evan Hierholzer
Sermon: July 21, 2019
Luke 10:38-42

Invocation

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

AMEN

Homily

Good morning! It is a pleasure to be with you today, and an honor to be in the pulpit. I have to admit that when I saw that our Gospel text for today was a mere five verses long, I was pretty thrilled. “Just five verses,” I thought, “I think I can handle that.” Fast forward a couple hours later, after having dug through seemingly endless commentaries dedicated to dissecting this apparently simple 5-verse story of Mary and Martha, I started thinking that this was easily the most complex and daunting passage in all of Scripture—but that’s just me—that’s part of my personality. I tend to analyze and over-function to the point of feeling paralyzed—maybe you’ve heard of this phenomenon-- “analysis paralysis,” and I bet some of you may have even experienced it.

If so, then you, and I, and many others in the history of the church are in good company—like Martha—we tend to get “distracted by our many tasks” such that we fail to hear the words of the Lord, we fail to listen to God’s voice, reassuring us and equipping us to receive love and show love to others. My hope is that you will hear the Spirit’s voice through this text, regardless of what exactly the passage “means.”

More often than not this passage has been preached as a criticism of being distracted by busyness to the point of failing to pay attention to Jesus. I think this is a fair take on this passage, and, God knows, we live in a world and culture which seem to prize industry and busy-ness above all other values, including even our own mental, physical, and spiritual health. But is there more to this passage than that Martha is wrong and Mary is right: preoccupation with tasks is bad, and learning from Jesus is good?

Let’s take a closer look at the reading, and see what we may see and hear: The story begins with Jesus entering an unnamed town, where he is shown hospitality by a woman named Martha. The story makes it seem as if Martha is really the head of this household, and she shows the kind of hospitality and welcome that would typically have been expected of a patriarch. We are then told that Martha has a sister named Mary who

sat at the “Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.” Despite how simple and straight-forward this sounds, it is actually quite a remarkable sentence. To sit at someone’s feet, listening to their words is the distinctive posture of a disciple—a student and follower of the Lord—for Mary, a woman, to be depicted in this way depicts Jesus as a counter-cultural teacher who not only tolerated, but actively embraced women as part of his movement and way of life. Thus, Martha, as head of household, and Mary, as a full-fledged disciple, were both challenging traditional gender-roles in their welcome of the Lord.

We are not told what exactly Martha was busy with, nor what Jesus was saying, we simply read that Martha was “distracted by her many tasks.” Another helpful way to translate this is that Martha was drawn off, or drawn away, by her many services.” Martha feels strongly enough about her tasks that she actually chides Jesus “Don’t you care that my sister has left me alone with all the work—tell her to get up and help me!” The frustration is very clear. Jesus responds, repeating her name twice, “Martha, Martha,” In my ears, the tone sounds tender and reassuring, not condemning: “You are drawn in many directions and anxious. Just one thing is needed: Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.”

I don’t know about you, but I relate much more with Martha than with Mary in this text. If you’re anything like me, you may have been that kid in the class that pulled all the weight in the group project while your friends coasted and got the good grade that really belonged to you alone—If you’ve experienced this, then you have felt Martha’s pain. You know—the anger, the resentment, and eventually going to the teacher to complain about the injustice of it all. But what’s interesting is that Jesus resists getting triangled into things—he doesn’t side with Martha against Mary, but he does note what effect Martha’s industry has on her. Jesus doesn’t fault Martha for showing hospitality or making the necessary preparations, but he does see Martha’s anxiety to the point of distraction—if this anxiety is the effect of hospitality, then Mary has certainly chosen the better part. I can hear in Jesus’ “Martha, Martha” a feeling of sadness—The Lord sees and laments the burden of anxiety that lies upon Martha; he feels sorry that his friend is distracted to the point that what should be a celebratory event becomes a chance to complain, compare, and blame. It is enough for Jesus to see Martha’s pained expression—however noble Martha’s tasks are, her pained expression tells Jesus everything he needs to know—his friend Martha’s service is not worth the anxiety it has evidently produced. Perhaps, as some have noted, Martha sees Jesus as a Lord to be

served, whereas Mary sees Jesus as a Lord who intends to serve her and others. Our Lord does not demand service like other leaders; rather, he came to serve himself to others.

If Martha's distraction and anxious industriousness is identified as unhelpful at best, and self-destructive at worst, what is it in Mary that Jesus commends? For this question it might be helpful to look back at the story that immediately precedes this one in the Gospel of Luke. Immediately before today's story of Martha and Mary is the famous story of the Good Samaritan. As you may recall a lawyer asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus asks the lawyer what he, himself thinks. The lawyer gives the response: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says that this answer is correct, and then tells the story of the good Samaritan as a response to the question of who our neighbor is, and what it looks like to love our neighbor. Many interpreters believe that the story of Martha and Mary is the second part of Jesus' answer to the lawyer: In other words, if the story of the Good Samaritan shows us what it looks like to love our neighbor as our self, then the story of Martha and Mary show us what it looks like to love God, in this case, God in the person of Jesus. When viewed in this context, we can see that the acts of service we do toward others which Jesus highly commends in the Samaritan, can become anxiety-producing, distracting tasks, when the tasks themselves become task-masters and not opportunities to demonstrate our love of God and others. Mary's love of God in attending to Jesus' presence and words leads to her joy and peace; Martha's prioritization of service over mere relationship with the Lord leads to distraction, feelings of bitterness, and rivalry. We are not told precisely what that "better part" is which will never be taken from Mary, but could it be that in whatever Jesus' words were that day, Mary encountered the God who grounds all meaning and whose presence and peace allows us to serve others, free from anxiety and resentful comparison? Perhaps Mary encountered in the Lord, the God who ultimately sustains the work of the Kingdom of Heaven. Perhaps Mary's choice was the better part because we must encounter and embrace a divine and merciful love before we can give of ourselves to others—There's an old maxim in pastoral care that you can't give what you don't have. I have experienced this personally. Without loving myself and God's spirit within me, I cannot provide meaningful spiritual care to others—I become exhausted, depleted, distracted and bitter. Like Martha, I become a slave to ministry, rather than God liberating me to minister to others.

As I mentioned before, I do not believe we have here a simple condemnation of Martha's anxious industry, and a praise of Mary's mature devotion to Jesus. In fact, many

medieval Christians and mystics saw in this story that both Martha and Mary contribute important insight into our role as followers of the way of Jesus. In the words of Teresa of Avila: ““to give our Lord a perfect hospitality...Mary and Martha must combine.” There is no justification in this story for a kind of love of God that can be separated from serving others. Another mystic, Meister Eckhart, actually has a quite a unique take on this passage which reverses many traditional understandings of this text. In his view, Martha was farther along in her spiritual journey, and her chiding of her sister could be paraphrased as, ““Lord, I do not like her sitting there just for the pleasure of it. I want her to learn life and really possess it. Tell her to rise and really be Mary.”” In other words, the contemplation of the divine should impel one to activity in service of the divine.

As we read and encounter this text, and as we head out into a new week, full of its own burdens and worries, it is my hope and prayer that whether you are more of a type-A Martha, who is hospitable to a fault, or more of a docile, contemplative Mary, that there is a place for you in the Kingdom—My prayer is that, if in your charitable ministries here at Reconciliation or elsewhere, you feel bitter that others are not as involved as they might be, or if you find yourself angry that you seem to give and give and give, while others appear maddeningly content in their journey on Jesus’ way of love—my prayer is that you will be reminded of your first love, which impelled you to serve so devotedly in the first place. Be attentive to feelings of obligation or resentment when you serve others—perhaps you are neglecting the “better part.” On the other hand, if your relationship with God leaves you feelings stagnant, perhaps there are life-giving acts of service that God is inviting you to, perhaps there are neighbors left by the wayside, bloodied and wounded, whose wounds we might bind up and heal. My prayer is that you may combine both Martha and Mary in your contemplation and practice in order to offer true hospitality to God and others.

AMEN