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“Lord, Do You Not Care...?”

Luke 10:38-42

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Our scripture passage is part of a smaller unit in Luke that spills from a lawyer’s question. The man asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In response, Jesus elicits from him the two great love commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all our mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.” Luke then goes on to illustrate “love your neighbor as yourself” with the parable of the Good Samaritan. And what immediately follows that parable sheds light on the first commandment, asserting that to love God with all one’s heart, soul, strength, and mind entails sitting at Jesus’ feet and “listening to his word.”

Luke 10:38-42. ³⁸Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But 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.’ ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’

The story of Mary and Martha evokes strong reactions. Some hail our passage as one of the most liberating texts for women in the Gospels, in that it reflects an opening for women within the circle of Jesus’ disciples and challenges traditional expectations about women’s roles. Others,



however, find the story oppressive, in that it pits sister against sister, establishes a good woman/bad woman dualism, and presents a seemingly ungrateful Jesus as devaluing the hospitality that a hardworking woman extends. Indeed, whenever women gather to discuss it, at least one of them groans, “I have always hated this story!”ⁱ

Perhaps reactions to this story are so strong because the setting is so familiar to us. It’s not often we see water turned into wine or witness a miraculous healing. Few of us could turn a churchwide Christmas dinner into a feast with five loaves and two fish. But a tense moment at a household gathering? We’re so familiar with it that it’s like we’re right in the room. Luke takes us into the home of Martha and Mary, and immediately we recognize, oh, we’ve been here before.

Luke says that Martha opened her home to Jesus. This is, by Luke’s telling, an autonomous female household. Luke mentions no brother (Lazarus is only named in John’s gospel), husband, or father. It is Martha who plays the role of host. She oversees the material needs of her guests. As a Palestinian Jew, Martha is anxious to ensure that her honored guest Jesus and his disciples feel welcomed at her home.ⁱⁱ We can see it now – Martha getting it done; Mary, taking a seat and listening to Jesus without a care in the world.

I can feel the tension. Perhaps I can feel the tension because I’m the one in the kitchen. At this stage in my life and ministry, I tend to read this story from more of a Martha place than a Mary place.

But no one is purely Martha or Mary. This is not a personality test. The world is not divided into two types: hard workers and people who just sit there, anxious worriers and masters of contemplation. We’re both. We need to befriend both Mary and Martha within us.

Mary sits and listens, skirting tradition and taking the place of a student at the rabbi’s feet. Jesus says she’s chosen the better part.

We don’t tend to place much value in sitting or listening. We tell women to lean in. We vote for politicians who get things done. We fret endlessly about how busy we are. We tell little children to speak up. We don’t have much patience for someone who just sits there. We overlook the listeners. We feel guilty if we don’t get enough accomplished in a day. And as much as we like to imagine this is a sickness peculiar to our time, surely the pressure to work was even greater when one’s very survival required hauling water and pounding grain, when every morsel eaten was made from scratch at home, and all laundry was done by hand. But, in spite of all that needs to get done, Mary just sits there, and Jesus says this is good and won’t be taken from her.

My friend Sarahⁱⁱⁱ shared with our preaching group that the last time she read this passage out loud in a Bible study at her church, one stalwart saint named Pat cried out, “Who does Jesus think does the dishes, anyway?!” Pat, as far as anyone can tell, really is a saint. Pat prays for people who annoy her, she’s survived the death of her only child with wholeness and kindness, marriage and faith intact. You don’t get more faithful than someone like Pat. She’s also the kind of woman



who makes the church run. She coordinates the details for memorial services. She decorates tables for potlucks. She has obligations at church more days than not. And Pat hates this story.

“Who does Jesus think does the dishes, anyway?!”

Martha does them. And Pat does them. And lots of other busy, worried, distracted saints. The world has been built on their work, work that is usually invisible and thankless.

Friday Night Lights was a TV show that ran in the mid- to late-2000’s and tells the story of a new football coach in a small Texas town that takes football very seriously. The marriage between head coach Eric Taylor and his wife Tami is a solid one. In one early episode, Eric forgets to tell Tami that they’re hosting the entire football team at their house that week for a traditional rivalry week dinner. He gives her two days’ notice for a dinner for about 50-ish people that turns into a party for 100. Things finally come to a head with a heated fight between Tami and Eric held underneath the dining room table. Tami is exhausted and reasonably resentful that Eric hasn’t noticed or cared how much work it would take to pull the whole thing off.

Jesus here seems as oblivious as Coach Taylor. He doesn’t appear to appreciate how hard Martha is working to welcome and feed him, and not only that, but he’s passing judgment on her at the same time.

Here’s what I think it feels like to be Martha in this moment: it feels pressured and rushed. It feels tight and like there’s no way out. It feels like the world closing in, and no matter what she does, nothing will be good enough.

That’s the real kicker. To work that hard and believe, with a sinking feeling, that no matter how hard you work, it still won’t be good enough. No matter how many hours you put in, how hard you try, there will still be another mile to go and no one will notice; no matter how many dishes you wash or loads of laundry you do, no one will help, and the clothes will keep getting dirty and there will still be more.

And then, while you’re working this hard to take care of business, some people have the gall to just sit there and do nothing. That is not fair. And one day all the anxiety and worry and hard work and desire to please all boils over, and you find yourself screaming at Jesus to please make your sister help you, just this once.

It never goes well when we tell Jesus it’s not fair. Jesus never says, “You’re right. Let me see what I can do about it.” He always asks us to take a step back and look at the situation again. It’s no different with Martha here.

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things....” Jesus didn’t call Martha out for her lack of hospitality. It was not her cooking, cleaning, or serving that bothered him. It’s that his friend Martha is “*worried* and *distracted* by many things.”

The root meaning of the word “worry” is “strangle” or “seize by the throat and tear.” The root meaning of the word “distraction” is “a separation or a dragging a part of something that



should be whole.”^{iv} These are violent words. Words that wound and fracture. States of mind that divide and break us.

“You are worried and distracted by many things...”

Jesus found Martha in just such a state of fragmentation—a condition in which she could not enjoy his company, savor his presence, find inspiration in her work, receive anything he wished to offer her, or show him genuine love. Instead, all she could do was question his love (“Lord, do you not care?”), fixate on herself (“My sister has left me to do all the work by myself”) and triangulate (“Tell her then to help me.”)

Does any of this sound familiar? What has you worried? Distracted? Fragmented and frazzled? It could be because of a myriad of things—not just about household chores, but also perhaps the relationships that mean the most to you. It could stem from the state of our country to the sad state of humankind. There is a lot that might have you worried and distracted.

“Martha, Martha,” he says. When the words are flat on the page, they sound like scolding. But Jesus loves Martha—he sees her for who she truly is, a beautiful child of God. If this is how Jesus sees her, then we can only imagine they came from a place of genuine care.

Perhaps Jesus was laughing when he said her name, or maybe he was incredibly gentle. Perhaps his words felt like the warm embrace she so sorely needed.

Jesus sees Martha’s resentment and rage. He sees that she thinks she’s stressed because she has too much to do and no one to help. He sees much deeper than that, too. He sees how worried she is. Maybe he sees how she longs for approval, or how she deeply wants to be noticed, or how she’s trying to earn her place in the world by being “good enough.”

So, he calls her name, the way he will call Mary Magdalene’s name in the garden early one morning, and he invites her to a new life. He’s not calling her away from service or tangible acts of love. There’s nothing wrong with doing for others. He just invites her to go deeper, to set down everything that’s not necessary.

He’s not telling her she shouldn’t cook or clean. He’s not telling her she’s not good enough. He’s telling her that it’s all already fine. With dinner late and the house a wreck, it’s all fine. She’s fine. She is more than fine, she is loved. Just as she is.

Jesus points to Mary not because she’s sitting still, but because she’s doing what she’s doing with attention, focus, and love. That’s what Jesus wants Martha to see—what it looks like to do something different, what it looks like to pay attention with love.

“Lord, do you not care...?” Martha asks. “Yes,” Jesus says to Martha. “Yes, I care—I see what fills your mind and drowns your hope. I see what occupies your thoughts and leaves little room for anything else. I see the worry you shoulder not just for today, but for tomorrow and the next day and the next. Yes, Martha. I see. I care.”



Jesus always sees.

The trouble is when we don't see ... when we don't see—when we pass by on the other side—we miss those things Jesus would give his attention to. When we give in to the phrase, “it is what it is,” when we accept that the world around us is the best we can do, then we are pointing our attention, our energy, our service in the wrong direction.

The story of Mary and Martha is not a story about who is better. The better thing here in this scene is the invitation to believe that you are who God sees you to be. The better thing here is to pay attention with love.

This is the root of our greatest problems—an inherent, systemic, ingrained, dysfunctional belief that not all are worthy of God's attention and love. Jesus' words to Martha are not a rebuke, but an invitation—an invitation to see more in herself than she thought possible and, in turn, to see the same possibilities in others.

Perhaps we can be more prepared to hear God inviting us to see more in ourselves than we have before. Perhaps we can begin to see all others as God's beloved children. Perhaps we too can pay attention with love.

ⁱ Frances Taylor Gench. *Back to the Well*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 56.

ⁱⁱ Niveen Sarras. “Commentary on Luke 10:38-42.” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-3/commentary-on-luke-1038-42-5>. July 17, 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks to Sarah Wiles for her paper on this passage for our preaching group By the Vine in 2015.

^{iv} Debie Thomas. “Only One Thing.” *Journey with Jesus*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2282-only-one-thing>. July 14, 2019.

