

*In the presence of the faithful, I will proclaim your name, for it is good. (Psalm 52 v9)*

I have to confess that each time I hear the story of Mary and Martha, I initially think that Martha got the short end of the stick, stuck with all the work while Mary gets to enjoy Jesus' company. I also have to confess that more times than not, I prefer the role of Mary as I perceive it, content to let the other members of my household to prepare the meal – or clean up afterwards, while I entertain the guests. Of course, I feel guilty about failing to do my share of the labor, but not so guilty that I willingly give up interacting with my guests. Having said this, I have also been the one doing the work of putting an elaborate meal on the table and doing a slow burn as I hear laughter from the living room with no one coming to the kitchen to lend a helping hand.

Like so many incidents recounted in the Bible, there are sparse details in the story. This is probably a good thing, requiring us to use our imagination to fill in the blanks. From Martha's point-of-view, I imagine that this is what really happened: She hears a voice call out to her. She goes to the door and opens it. "Jesus!" she exclaims with delight, "How nice to see you! I see you have Peter, James and John with you! Oh, and there are the rest! Come in! Come in!" She steps out of the way as Jesus and the 12 walk into home, greeting her and exchanging warm pleasantries. "Mary!" Martha calls out. "Look who's here!"

Will you see that our guests are comfortable while I get something for them to eat?" Martha's mind is now on a dozen or more tasks. "Where are the extra benches?" She thinks to herself. "Do I have enough for everyone to sit down? What do I have in the larder? The tablecloth and napkins are drying on the line...I wonder if I have time to iron them?" She whirls about in the kitchen, pulling on an apron, mentally calculating how many chickens it will take to feed 15 people, how many peas she should shell, wondering if she has enough dough rising to make rolls. She hears laughter from the other room and she wonders why Mary hasn't shown up to give her a hand. By the time she has put the last chicken on the spit, she is "glowing" with sweat, wisps of hair have escaped from what was a well coifed head, and she is frustrated and exasperated with her sister. She can't believe that her sister has left her with all this to do. Finally, she can take it no more, she wipes her hands on her apron and storms into the other room, interrupting the discourse that's happening there. Everyone turns their head to look at her expectantly; Jesus eyes' are warm and questioning. Martha forgets herself and her frustration just pours out of her "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself?! Tell her to help me!"

“Martha, Martha,” Jesus says kindly with mild reproof, “I can see that you are worried and distracted about many things but there is only one thing that is necessary; Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”

Now if I were Martha, this would have been like throwing cold water at me. It probably brought her up short. Jesus’ words, though short are packed with meaning and unspoken assumptions. Hospitality is expected and offered by both Mary and Martha. Mary is being hospitable simply by being attentive to her guest. Martha is being hospitable by seeing that her guests’ physical needs are met. Indeed, she is “serving”, translated in this morning’s text as “tasks” and coming from the Greek word “diakonia”, from which we get our word for “deacon”, which is a servant ministry. Jesus is not gently chastising Martha for her ministry of service to him and to the 12. His gentle reproof, rather, is how she is going about her service, for Martha has lost sight of what her guests’ needs really are. In her desire to please and offer hospitality, Martha is going over the top and has lost sight of the dual demands on a host: to offer companionship as well as sustenance. Perhaps all Jesus and his disciples needed was something to drink, some fruit and some cheese. They had just stopped by, so could have no

expectation of ironed linens, plenty of seating and a full meal. If ever there was a moment to keep it simple, this was certainly one of them.

Jesus is reminding Martha that her focus would have been better placed on being in His presence, and learning from him about God and God's expectations of us. Mary was doing exactly this and Jesus was making sure that she wouldn't have to stop doing exactly that for the sake of pulling out all the stops. I suspect this story is included in Luke's Gospel because all of us are guilty of losing our focus on what's really important or essential, and no matter how innocent our motives or good our intentions, we can get carried away with trying to show how much we care. Sometimes we might get tempted to impress. It is exactly this very human tendency that gives rise to the aphorism "the road to Hell is paved with good intentions."

In our culture, it is all too easy to lose our focus on what is essential and important. Entire industries have grown up around the many claims on our time and attention, from best-selling books like "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" to personal coaches and organizing professionals. These tools are to help us maximize our time and our productivity. They only work, however, if we first become aware of what is truly important. For me, I have no problem determining

what is important; I have a problem of maintaining **the awareness** of what is truly important as I get caught up in the activities of everyday living. And I confess to mindlessly checking e-mails, Facebook and playing on-line games such as “Words with Friends”. I justify this as “maintaining relationships” and they might do that. Neither, however, are substitutes for a real conversation and focused attention that foster deeper relationships.

I’ve discovered that in order to avoid being caught up in all the little things that threaten to overwhelm me, I have to maintain disciplines that nudge me toward behaving more like Mary rather than the misspent albeit valuable efforts of Martha. I put my technology to use by listening to a daily devotional podcast that takes all of ten minutes. I try to give it my full attention for those 10 minutes. My day is usually more centered and productive when I do. From childhood, Sunday has been the day to worship God and be with family. It anchors my week and sustains me. Each day I also try to say one of the daily offices, typically Compline as a way to quiet my mind so that I can get a restful sleep. By giving my attention to God, I am equipped to do all that I feel I have to do.

I like to think that there is a postscript to the Mary and Martha story that failed to make it into Luke’s Gospel account. Jesus is already being counter-

cultural by teaching Mary along with the rest of the disciples. I'd like to think that Jesus, Mary and the disciples all got up, set the benches around the table as well as set the table, and assisted in finishing getting dinner ready. I'd like to think that Martha could laugh at herself for getting overly caught up in preparing "the perfect meal" and allowed the guests to help finish what she had begun. I'd like to think that table fellowship was abundant, the conversation lively, and the love warmly felt by all. In short, I hope that it was a version of the Eucharistic Feast that we are about to share and if we keep our focus there, everything else will fall into place. AMEN.

NOTE: This sermon was preached on July 17, 2016 without notes. The audio version varies significantly from the written version.