

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge July 21,2019

Pentecost 9

Luke 10:38-42

It's really not fair, is it? A guest has arrived and he's brought friends with him – lots of friends. Martha has welcomed this honored guest into the home she shares with her sister, Mary, and now the work begins. Supper has to be fixed. The table set. Water and bowls and towels to wash the weary guests' feet. It's lots of work. In fact, it's enough work for two or three people; but Martha finds herself doing it alone.

Now, Martha's a very conscientious host so she's feeling the pressure to do it just right. She wants this evening to be a success. She's under a lot of stress. Where the heck is her sister? Where is Mary, darn it? Not helping, that's for sure. In fact, it looks like Mary's just taking it easy. Relaxing. Sitting at the feet of the honored guest. Listening to his every word. All the while hard-working Martha is taking care of business with no one to help her. Pretty frustrating. Pretty unfair. Pretty darn irritating.

We've all been there, haven't we? We've all been in a place where it seems like **we're** the ones having to do all the hard work. A situation where it seems like it's all up to us. We've all said to ourselves at one time or another, "It's just not fair".

The story of Jesus' arrival at the home of Martha and Mary can feel a little troublesome for us. It's so easy to be judgmental, "Martha, be more like Mary!" In fact, it even feels like Jesus is being a little judgmental here, doesn't it? And that makes it difficult, because as much as we think we're supposed to be Marys, we are more often Marthas. We do value hard work and productivity. Those are generally very good things, let's be clear. But we also value **busyness**. Sometimes busyness just for the sake of being busy.

I recall coming back from vacation a few years back and walking into the office and someone calling out, "The Rector's back. Everyone look busy," Now that was meant to be a joke of course, but like lots of jokes it does contain a grain of truth. We somehow think it's important to **look** busy and to **be** busy. And that can lead to frustration and resentment when others don't look as busy as we are. I think that's what we're hearing in Martha's voice. Frustration that there's lots of work to be done and she's doing it all on her own. Resentment that she's **busy** and

Mary's not. And it's into that frustration and resentment that we hear the voice of Jesus.

"Martha, Martha. You are worried and distracted by many things. There is only need of one thing. Mary has chosen the better part."

Now this is a story about hospitality, isn't it? And it seems like Martha in all her busyness is the one who is giving of herself to extend hospitality while selfish Mary indulges herself by sitting at the feet of her guest. But in fact it really is Mary that gets the most important piece of hospitality – loving attention to one's guest. True and deep **listening** to the guest. Martha's distraction and worry, on the other hand, don't leave any room for hospitality. In fact, she breaks all the rules of hospitality by trying to embarrass her sister in front of her guest and by asking the guest to get in the middle of this sibling argument. She even goes so far as to suggest to Jesus that he doesn't care about her. "Lord you do not care....?"

Martha's anxious distraction – all her worry – her 'worry-wartness' alienates her from her sister and alienates her from Jesus. She's missed out on "the one thing" that's needed for true hospitality. There's no greater hospitality than **listening** to your guest. Even more so when the guest is Jesus.

So maybe now we can see that Jesus words to Martha aren't a judgment They're an invitation.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by **many** things. There is only need of **one thing**" The one thing Martha needs is Jesus. To listen to Jesus. To delight in his presence. To know that she is beloved. To know that she is loved and valued not for what she does but for who she is.

A couple of chapters later in Luke's gospel, we'll hear Jesus say, "Can you by worrying add a single hour to the span of your life?"

What has worry, just in and of itself, ever accomplished? **Yes**, we do have important work to do. We have tasks to accomplish. To care for our families and ourselves. To care for our neighbors. That's after all what the parable of the Good Samaritan that we heard last Sunday, and that Luke tells just before this story, is all about Jesus. Jesus does say to the young lawyer, "Go and **do** likewise". But if all our activity, if all our productivity, if all our busyness doesn't leave us time to listen to the Lord, to simply **be** in Jesus' presence, to simply know ourselves as God's own beloved, to just breathe -in and out – to just be with the blue sky the fresh breeze, the bright sun – well, we will inevitably end up in a place of worry

and anxiety and frustration and resentment. Luke, the master storyteller, places the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Martha and Mary side by side to remind us that we are called to be **both** Martha and Mary. Martha's focus is all on **me**. "**My** sister has left **me** to do all the work by **myself**." All about me. Watch your pronouns. Turning the focus from ourselves to focus on Jesus – on the **one thing** that is needed – moves us out of that narrow, selfish, self-referential space and into the expansive space of relationship with Jesus and with each other.

But how do we do it? How, in the midst of our busyness, in the midst of our productivity, how do we slow down and spend time with Jesus? I ran across a little story, I'm about to share with you, the other day in a completely different context. But as soon as I read it, it was clear that it's a true Martha and Mary story. It involves the well-known Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who for over 50 years has been engaged in interfaith dialogue with Christians like Thomas Merton and Thomas Keating and Richard Rohr. He's also the author of *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, one of the most profound and insightful books on interfaith dialogue I've ever read. This little story is told by a man named Jim de Forest. He writes:

I am reminded sometimes of an evening with Vietnamese friends in a cramped apartment in the outskirts of Paris in the early 1970's. At the heart of the community was the poet and monk Thich Nhat Hanh. An interesting discussion was going on in the living room, but I had been given the task that evening of doing the washing up. The pots and pans and dishes seemed to reach halfway to the ceiling on the counter of the sink in that closet-sized kitchen. I felt really annoyed. I was stuck with an infinity of dirty dishes while a great conversation was happening just out of earshot in the living room.

Somehow Nhat Hanh picked up on my irritation. Suddenly he was standing next to me. "Jim," he asked, "what is the best way to wash the dishes?" I knew I was suddenly facing one of those very tricky Zen questions. I tried to think what would be a good Zen answer, but all I could come up with was, "You should wash the dishes to get them clean." "No," said Nhat Hanh. "You should wash the dishes to wash the dishes." I've been mulling over that answer ever since – more than three decades of mulling. But what he said next was instantly helpful: "You should wash each dish as if it were the baby Jesus."

That sentence was a flash of lightning. While I still mostly was the dishes to get them clean, every now and then, I find I am, just for a passing moment, washing

the baby Jesus. And when that happens, though I haven't gone anywhere, it's something like reaching the Mount of the Beatitudes after a very long walk.

So this week, my dear sisters and brothers, in the midst of your busyness, spend time with Jesus. Let go of the worry and distraction. It will add not one hour to the span of your life. Sit at his feet. Listen to his voice as you pick up Luke's gospel. Read some of it. Take a nice walk in this beautiful season. Imagine Jesus is walking with you, enjoying the sunshine and the breeze and the flowers.

We have a lovely hymn that really captures Jesus' invitation to us.

*Come Risen Lord, and deign to be our guest*

*Nay, let us be thy guests, the feast is thine;*

*Thyself at thine own board made manifest*

*In thine own Sacrament of Bread and Wine.*