

July 22, 2007
Rev. Tassie M. Green
Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:23-24; 38-42

“Enough of Too Much”

Our house looked as if it was the epicenter of an earthquake the first week of July, as our whole family worked to pack up everything out of closets and nooks and crannies to prepare our house to go on the market. In the midst of this huge job, I decided one night to look up the lectionary Bible passages for today's sermon and begin reading up on them. As I sat on the couch with various commentaries, Bible translations and the Greek text before me, Ken marched by with a heavy load of boxes and shook his head, “You're procrastinating!”

This might be the first time in church history a pastor has ever been accused of starting a sermon too early! I enjoy preparing to preach; I enjoy it more than packing boxes, certainly. I wanted time to mull over this passage about Mary and Martha. Knowing me as a pastor, and as one whose interest leans toward study and away from domestic pursuits, some of you may try to predict whose side of this biblical battle I will take. Will I choose Mary or Martha? Who will it be?

We're all fairly familiar with how the story unfolds; we've heard sermons before about this famous sisterly cat-fight. Martha has gained quite a reputation over history. We're sure Martha Stewart can't hold a candle to this biblical Martha, even if it's a homemade candle made with beeswax gathered from her own hives and rose-scented from her homegrown flowers.

And then there's Mary. We know Jesus sticks up for Mary when her big sister Martha tattles, accusing Mary publicly of being lazy because she chooses to listen to Jesus rather than help in the kitchen. Jesus gives a stern response to Martha's accusations. Since then, poor Martha has been labeled as a neurotic, obsessive busy-body...while Mary has been lifted up as a contemplative role model for us all. End of story.

Let's go eat donuts.

I'm not against donuts - although I do wonder if we'd need the weekly 10:30 service of healing if we didn't eat so many donuts around here - but I don't think this is the end of the story. I wonder if poor Martha has gotten a bad rap. After all, not all of us make the right choice all the time. In fact, some of us are so firm in our wrong-headedness, we may as well wear a sign, “I may be wrong, but I'm sure!”

And let's admit...we need Marthas. I needed a Martha while packing up my house. What can be so wrong about being a Martha? What can be so right about being a Mary?

Let's take another look at these two women. And before I go any further I want to state, “Men, you are not off the hook.” Yes, this story has been pored over by every woman's Bible study in every church in the nation. But the characters could just as easily have been men. My male friends assure me that if we shifted Jesus' surprise visit from a woman's house to a man's place of business, they could relate to this person - and the nonstop busyness and distraction. Picture “Marv” as a wealthy merchant, welcoming guests into his corporate tent, working the crowd, wheeling and dealing over camel caravans or even trying to arrange a favorable dowry for his daughter. All the while his brother Morrie sits on the couch and listens intently to Jesus. You get the idea. . . This is not just a story for women. Sorry fellas. None of us is off the hook. Jesus has something to teach us all here.

Jesus came to a certain town where a woman named Martha welcomed him. Some translations suggest she welcomes him to her home. In the gospel of John we meet this family again and the spotlight shines on the two women's brother, Lazarus, but in Luke we only encounter Mary and Martha. And note that Martha starts off right by showing wonderful hospitality to her guests. And then, surprisingly, she blows up, she blows it, she makes a public spectacle of herself and earns Jesus' public rebuke. What happened?

Martha was serving - the word is *Diakonai* in Greek - same Greek root as the word *deacon*, a role set up by the early church for those who serve others in need. Make no mistake, serving is a godly function. Luke tells us there was simply too much serving to do. The Bible states the problem as an objective fact of large quantity, not as a matter of Martha's impossibly high standards for gourmet entertaining. There was too much serving to do. We know Jesus showed up, possibly unannounced, with at least twelve male guests - and probably more people, if the crowds that followed Jesus everywhere are factored in. There was too much serving to do for one woman. Martha has not entered herself in Hebrew Living magazine's Supper Club of the Year contest. But here's where personal-ity kicks in. In light of too much to do, Martha complains and Jesus responds. More about that later.

Let's look at Mary. Luke tells us Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened - literally in Greek, she "listened to his word," his *logos*. She received him wholeheartedly as the prophet who spoke the truth, the word of God. In the gospel of Luke, sitting at someone's feet means acknowledging his authority. She accepts Jesus and his word wholeheartedly and with her whole being as well.

Different translations portray Jesus' exchange with Martha in different lights. Jesus responds to big sister's whiny accusation, "Martha, Martha, you are distracted, anxious, worried about, being pulled away by many things, by too much."

"Martha, Martha, you are anxious" - a word used for the petty entanglements of the world - anxiously entangled - and worse. The Greek bears the sense of being overwhelmed. Jesus then calls her *thuboromai* - literally, "Martha, Martha, you are putting yourself in an uproar!"

Have any of you ever "put yourself in an uproar?" Some of us would win gold medals for this if it were an Olympic competition. Ask my children. From their perspective, I sometimes even seem to enjoy "putting myself in an uproar." But what can be so wrong about being a Martha? What can be so right about being a Mary?

Even though the scripture acknowledges the very real challenge of too much serving for one woman to do, it reports Jesus' words to stressed-out Martha as, "Nope. Not the best choice to make."

I wonder if Martha thought, "Gee thanks, Jesus. That makes it all better. I'll just use the three-step therapeutic technique: 1) Breathe in. 2) Breath out. 3) Get over it. No problem." We can't easily solve the problem of "too much to do" by ourselves, can we?

Let's back up a minute and consider "too much serving to do." Remember the root Greek word "*diakonai*" or *deaconing*? "Too much *deaconing* to do." In our church also, there is often "too much wonderful *deaconing* to do." We can get caught up in our committees, our benevolence backpack stuffing or Easter basket hunt. Valuable acts of service as they are, might Jesus kindly respond to us, "Member, Member, you are distracted, anxious, worried, being pulled away about many things?" You are "putting yourself in an uproar."

What can be so wrong about being a Martha? What can be so right about being a Mary? "If we [criticize] Martha

too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether. If we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever.”

Fred Craddock, an insightful American preacher, helped me find clues to the answer by shining light on the greater Biblical context. Craddock reminded me that this story of Mary and Martha follows fast on the heels of another well-known story - the Good Samaritan, a story which Rev. Bob Hunter covered last week. These stories are both about people whom Jesus encountered and about their hearing and not hearing Jesus’ words. In our gospel reading today, I included Jesus’ preamble to these texts, his blessing the disciples for all they were seeing and hearing. Did you notice I then skipped right over Good Sam? The Pharisee in that story does not understand the point of the law he serves when he walks by the injured man on the roadside. And when the lawyer to whom Jesus tells the story responds, “And who is my neighbor?” we realize he does not hear Jesus’ words.

And then we meet Martha. Martha, Martha, who is so distracted and uproarious she misses the one thing that is needed, to focus on her guest, simply to listen to Jesus. These stories are both about hearing and not hearing. But Jesus has different recommendations for each person he meets. Craddock summarizes, “To the lawyer, Jesus says, ‘Go and do.’ To the woman, Jesus says, ‘Sit down, listen and learn.’”

Jesus urges, “Choose the better part. Sit down, listen and learn.” This charge is difficult. Even for me, a pastor. Especially for me, a pastor.

In one of my first sermons at Second, Pres., six years ago, I told about my long-term, small-group Bible Study in Seattle and how the women had different approaches to accountability and reading the Bible. To spur myself on to set aside quiet time daily to read my Bible and pray, I set up what I called the “Great Ice Cream Wager,” in which I would owe my friends an ice cream cone if I did not read my Bible five out of seven days a week.

Another woman in that small group said firmly, “No. No bets, no questions, no nothing. Not for me. Don’t accuse or even ask me about this struggle. Just be faithful and read your Bibles and let God work in your lives and that will inspire me to do it also.” But I knew I needed the accountability. And I confessed to our eating quite a bit of ice cream together. (We’re not always our own best analysts of ourselves, so we need the outside perspective of Jesus’ words and community to help us grow.) “If we [criticize] Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether. If we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever.”

One young mom came up to me right after the sermon, sounding amazed, “Well you sure are brave, telling us about your struggles. Very brave.” Then she ran away before I could ask her any questions about her life.

Do we need courage to admit to each other when we are Marthas instead of Marys? Do we need courage to admit when we are serving our employers or families or communities or even churches too much, when we are “putting ourselves in an uproar?” Do we need courage to admit when we are distracted, anxious, overwhelmed?

The Bible shows us where to find that courage, that focus...sitting at Jesus’ feet. Mary sits down, listens and learns. Picture Mary, at first focused on hospitality to her guests and on her tasks, yet all the while listening intently as she serves, until she is drawn in wholly, drawn in so completely she does not even realize she has sunk to the floor to sit and listen, serving tray still in hand. At some point she sets it aside and takes off her apron, choosing the better part, as Jesus affirms.

We may remember brief times when we, too, felt we’d had enough of too much and we chose the better part. We made choices to simplify, to slow down, to cut back or cut out. While I applaud those efforts, they are not enough to help us on their own. This passage is not about simply sitting for sitting’s sake. Mary sat at Jesus’ feet

in the midst of her busyness in order to “listen to his words,” in order to receive his truth into her life. Martha did not.

We may remember times when we were Marys, when we read our Bibles and prayed daily. What did it do for us to “sit down, listen and learn?” Why and when did we become distracted again, distracted, anxious, worried about, being pulled away by many things, by too much?” When and why did we “put ourselves in an uproar” all over again? Do we need to hear Jesus’ voice calling us anew to the one thing? And what might it look like today for us to sit down, listen and learn at Jesus’ feet?

Our epistle reading paints a striking portrait of Jesus, “the image of the invisible God. . .in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. . . . He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.” Wow! Paul certainly outdid himself here. Paul becomes swept up in his vision of Jesus and carries us, the reader or listener of Scripture, with him.

What might it do for us to meditate on these words of Scripture? What might it do for us to meditate on these words for one week? What might it do for us to meditate on these words for one month? What might it do for us to meditate on these words for one year? What might it do for us to sit down at the feet of Jesus and listen and learn, to re-center our lives upon Jesus, to accept Christ’s invitation to choose the better part? I can’t say, for sure, what that might look like in each of our lives, but how exciting would it be for us in community to find out together, to support one another in our efforts to sit down, listen and learn from Jesus, from his word?

How do we do so without adding to our problem of “too much to do?” Keep it simple. Begin with one passage - today’s Colossians passage could feed our hearts and minds for a long time. Think about it - how might we act if we soaked in this mighty portrait of Jesus to water our minds? How might we trust him all the more if this triumphant portrait of Jesus was sealed on our hearts? How might that change begin to happen in our lives? Through setting aside regular time to “sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to his words,” by reading the Bible, God’s word, and praying for guidance.

How can we prevent becoming distracted again, distracted, anxious, worried about, being pulled away by many things, by too much? How can we prevent “putting ourselves in an uproar?” Jesus, “the fullness of God,” draws us in, just as his words drew in Mary and he then commended her for choosing the better part. Jesus calls us just as he called Martha, perhaps extending a hand to invite Martha also to sit down with him and “choose the better part.” At first, we may only focus for brief moments in our days. But we can choose to sit down, listen and learn from Jesus, just as Martha did.

Just as Martha did. Don’t I mean just as Mary did? Nope. Not this time. In Scripture, when we meet Martha again in the gospel of John, she is on the road striding out to greet Jesus after her brother’s death. In that interaction about death and resurrection, she confesses to Jesus powerfully, “I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Yes, those profound words come from Martha, the sister who didn’t stop to focus on Jesus, even when he was in her own house. Martha has learned to listen to Jesus; Martha has become a hearer. What the epistle of James calls “a hearer and doer of the word.” If there’s hope for Martha, there’s hope for me...there’s hope for you.

We might well ask again, “What can be so wrong about being a Martha? What can be so right about being a Mary?” Jesus shows us nothing is inherently wrong or right with either one. It’s not the woman’s - or even our

- personality or actions that make the difference. It is not the busyness of one or the stillness of the other that makes the difference. The key lies in our response to Jesus, in our hearing the word. Everything is made right by listening to Jesus' words. By choosing the one thing, Marys and Marthas alike come to Jesus and are transformed.

Do we need to hear Jesus' voice, calling us anew to the better part? Focus on Jesus, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Sit down at Jesus' feet and listen to his words. Enough of too much. Put aside the serving tray - briefly, yet regularly - in order to sit down, listen and learn from Jesus, who calls us to one thing. Choose the better part. It will not be taken away from you. Amen.

Charge:

Enough of too much. Focus on the one thing - sit down at the feet of Jesus to listen and learn. Choose the better part.