

Listening to Martha & Mary

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 10:38-42

A few years ago, Tom Friedman wrote a column for the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, called simply, "The Taxi Driver." He told of being driven by cab from Charles de Gaulle Airport into Paris. He said that during the one-hour drive, he and the driver did six things: the driver drove the cab, talked on his cell phone, and watched a video – which was a bit nerve-wracking for his passenger! Meanwhile, that passenger, Friedman, rode in the back seat, worked on his laptop, and listened to his iPod. Said Friedman, "There was only one thing we never did: talk to each other."

Following our adult mission trip a few weeks ago, I was in the Louisville airport. I was early for my flight, so I went into a restaurant for some lunch. A family came in – a father and mother and two teenage children. They took menus, ordered their meals, then all four of them took out their phones. As far as I could tell, they never spoke a word to each other for the remainder of their meal – totally absorbed in their texts, e-mails or whatever.

In the words of Linda Stone, who writes about issues of technology, the disease of the Internet age is "continuous partial attention." We have become a people who are "distracted by many things."

In my first church in Warren, PA, there was a group of older women who called themselves the Martha Society. They identified with Martha in our text. They saw themselves as the people who got things done in the church. They made sure all arrangements were made, food on the tables, glasses filled, candlesticks on the altar polished. They were the ones who attended to the necessary details, the doers, the ones who took on the tasks no one else wanted to do. Once, after I preached on this familiar text from Luke, a number of them told me that they really were not very fond of story of Martha and Mary. They felt Martha was unfairly criticized by Jesus. After all, if not for the Marthas of the world, nothing would ever get done.

And I could see their point. Martha is, in so many ways, my soul-sister. Just a couple of weeks ago, the day of our church picnic, before worship I was running around, going in fifteen directions at once, worrying about picnic details – were the tables set up, when would the chicken arrive, was food getting out on the serving tables? Church member, Jerry Warren, saw my anxiety and pointed out that just the week before, I had preached about Sabbath – stepping back, taking time off, not being so uptight about everything. He suggested that I didn't seem very Sabbath-like. I hate it when people throw my own words back at me. But he was right. At times I am so Martha – distracted by many things. And perhaps we are living more and more in a Martha-like culture...so unfocused and distracted.

And yet, having said that, I am not convinced this text is simply a critique of Martha, even though it has often been used this way. Nor, I should add, is it a put down of Mary. You may not know this, but over the years in the church, there have been those – and by those I mean men - who have used the example of Mary to restrict the role of women in the church, in ministry and especially in leadership positions. In their rather twisted interpretation of our story, Martha is called from service/ministry to join Mary in choosing the better part – a passive posture, sitting serenely before the Lord, in rapt attention, a woman once again subservient to a man. Hard to believe, but true. There are those – and by those I mean women – who insist that over the years the church has used this story to restrict the role of women in the church, denying women their gifts and calls to ministry.

This is precisely why I don't want to limit our interpretation of this familiar story to either/or - contemplative life or active life, word or deed, thought or action. Because when we do this, when we polarize Martha and Mary, make them one-dimensional, put their actions in opposition to each other, we are in danger of misreading the text. As one New Testament scholar writes, "Perhaps we preachers ought not to take sides in this family dispute, choosing one sister over the other. Jesus engages both sisters, though he engages them differently, and he gives them both the benefit of his teaching and his presence. We should rather see both sisters as two complimentary, necessary aspects of discipleship. Jesus loves both Mary and Martha and each sister shows her love for Jesus in different ways, and both ways are essential for faithfully following him."

A few days ago we had a meeting at the church concerning Village Park near the Laguna. You may not be aware that the city now owns that property and would like to turn it into a city park. But there are people living there, mostly poor people, some of whom have lived there for several years and have no where else to go. So we had a meeting with folks who are concerned about this situation, who want to make sure the City of Sebastopol treats everyone fairly. The leading was led by a community organizer from the North Bay Organizing Project. And, like all organizers, he wanted us to get out there and take action: meet with city officials, hold them accountable, let them know people are following their actions on this issue. You might say he was very much the Martha type: "We have to do something!"

But we also had our Mary. One woman, very much West County, was clearly distressed by the organizer's approach. She found it way too confrontational, almost painful. She wondered why we had to take a group of people to meet with city council members when we could instead just meet one-on-one. She concluded by asking, "Can't we just love each other?" Quiet, relational, no confrontation. I confess that her Mary was driving my Martha crazy....but she had a point. And that is Jesus' point. We need both Martha and Mary, we need some balance, not only in our life of faith, but in all of life.

I think of my own Martha pastoral style – moving ahead, setting goals, planning, full calendar, keeping any number of balls in the air at the same time. Just when many of my friends in ministry are retiring, I eagerly embrace a new building project. I try to keep myself organized and productive, knowing that a single phone call – Gene, can you come to the hospital – can completely change a week. And at times, I feel strained, hurried and breathless. I think of Charlie Brown, sitting in front of Lucy's psychiatric booth.

"Trouble seems to follow me everywhere," he says. "No matter where I go, I can't seem to escape it."

Dr. Lucy leans back, puts her feet up and says, "What you need, Charlie Brown, is an unlisted life."

Ever feel that way, especially when everything just seems fractured and fragmented, spinning out of control? But in such moments, and I believe I have gotten more intentional about this over the years – perhaps one of the few advantages of age – I go fishing, or spend a week away as I recently did on Washington Island on the northern tip of Door County, Wisconsin, where my people are from. Believe it or not, I actually do take moments of quiet, reflection, solitude, time to quiet the buzzing of my mind and just be. I know I need to nurture the Mary side of my life, to find some sense of balance.

And that is why I keep returning to this familiar story. Several scholars suggest that when Jesus says Mary has chosen the "better" part, a better translation might be that Mary has chosen the "good" part, which is to say that Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to his every word, is playing her part. But that does not mean the part played by Martha is bad. It's a role different from that played by Mary, but it's a good role for someone to play – it is a necessary part of the whole picture of discipleship. As one pastor writes, "Following Jesus is a demanding task. Sometimes it takes energy, resourcefulness, and lots of bold, hard work. And sometimes it means simply being with him, listening to him, enjoying him, and hanging on his every word."

For me, one who often is distracted by many things, it is important to hear Christ giving me permission to slow down, to let go, to be still and enjoy some quiet communion with Christ and myself, communion that can very well transform my doing as well as my being. Such moments are not a diversion from important tasks, but are, in fact, essential to a full life.

I once heard a story about a student who spent a summer working as a volunteer in a Jesuit home for the poor in the center of one of our nation's most blighted cities. They worked all day, every day, handing out food, ministering to human need as best they could. One particularly difficult, long day was drawing to a close. The student and an old Jesuit priest finally took care of the last person in need and were closing the big oak door for the night. He looked out and saw yet one more forlorn soul shuffling toward the home. The student watched the man coming toward them, thought how tired he was, and muttered, "Jesus Christ..."

To which the old Jesuit replied, "Could be, could be...we had better open the door."

The gift of Martha and Mary is that they remind us that there are any number of ways to open the door to Christ, to connect with the source that brings both peace and energy to all our undertakings. By God's grace, may we stay in touch with the one thing we most need, the good part that will not be taken away.