

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

July 18, 2010
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 10:38-42

Word and Work

In our worship this summer we have been looking at the messages of three prophets. Last month we began with the prophet Elijah and then at the end of the month and the beginning of this month, we continued with his successor, Elisha. Both Elijah and Elisha are Old Testament prophets that we read about in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. Last week we moved into the New Testament with a prophet named Jesus. In Luke's gospel Jesus' message often has a prophetic edge to it that can catch us with its sharpness. Last week our focus was on the parable of the good Samaritan in which Jesus turns upside-down the prevailing understanding of who is to be considered one's neighbor.

Today our focus is on the few verses that follow the telling of that parable. Jesus is in the home of his very close friends, Mary and Martha, who are sisters. In this episode these two sisters couldn't be portrayed as opposites more than they are here. Martha is bustling around the home all a twitter at having Jesus as a guest in her home. She is attending to all of the conventional hospitality details of her day. She is preparing not just a meal for them to eat, but the table upon which that meal will be served and around which the three of them will gather. No doubt Martha was well trained in the various aspects of the etiquette of her day of providing full and complete hospitality to a revered guest. Anybody of Jesus' time or of our time today for that matter can resonate with the effort that is required to be a good host or hostess. In complete contrast Martha's sister Mary is oblivious to her sister's efforts and devoid of any inclination to join in on the offering of hospitality. Rather she is said to have seated herself at Jesus' feet listening attentively to what he was teaching. So in the first scene in this vignette we have Martha scurrying about and Mary and Jesus deep in spiritual and intellectual dialogue. As I picture this scene, it's not only Mary who is oblivious to Martha's energetic efforts, Jesus is also seemingly unaware of Martha's level of activity.

In Jesus' day, to the first hearers of this story, the part of this scene that would seem odd is not Martha's behavior, but that of both Mary and Jesus. Martha is doing exactly what is expected of a good hostess who is privileged to have the likes of Jesus in her home. What would have been striking is that Mary was not aiding her sister in making preparations fit for a king. That Mary is seated at Jesus' feet would have been surprising because that is the location and posture of a disciple of a Rabbi or teacher—and in Jesus' day all such disciples would have been male. So not only is it disorienting that a woman is seated at his feet, but it is further perplexing that Jesus is not undone by this act of a woman and he is treating her as he would any other of his male disciples. He is attending to the task of teaching Mary, his disciple. So scene 1 in this 2-scene drama would be most intriguing to those witnessing it or hearing about it afterwards.

As we move into scene 2, Jesus, like he does in so many other places, turns the situation around in an effort to catch attention and make a point. As we read in the text, "Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to [Jesus] 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.'" (Lk. 10:40) Martha's perspective is the perspective witnesses to this event would have as well as the readers later on. Martha's perspective is that Mary's appropriate role in this

situation is to be the co-host in offering the hospitality called for in this circumstance. She knows that Jesus also understands the rules of etiquette that call for such a welcome to be extended by both of the women in this house. And so she appeals to Jesus to talk some sense into her sister. But that's not what happened. That's not what Jesus does at all. Rather he responds, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Lk. 10:41-41) The story ends here. We don't know how Martha responds. We don't know how Mary reacted. We can only guess.

Over the ages this story has been understood in a variety of ways, some appropriate and others inappropriate. "British biblical scholar Loveday Alexander catalogs several ways in which this text has been misread. One concerns interpreters' tendency to polarize Martha and Mary, forcing readers to put the sisters' actions in opposition to each other. Another involves characterizing Martha and Mary, along with their deeds, as one-dimensional, as if the story were an allegory wherein each woman represents a paradigm. A third tendency is to assume that the passage is primarily about women and their roles, as if gender takes center stage." (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., Westminster John Knox Press 2010, p. 267, She makes her points, which include more than the three related here, in "Sisters in Adversity," 177-85.) Sometimes you will hear people describe themselves as a "Mary" or a "Martha." "I'm more of 'Martha'" one might say if she is the type to work behind the scenes. Or another might say, "I'm a 'Mary' because I don't like the behind the scenes tasks. But Jesus is not setting these two women as models of behavior that are in opposition. When he says that Mary has chosen the better part, he is referring to her devotion to him. Jesus is not suggesting that Martha is not devoted. Likewise, Jesus is also not suggesting that one of these two women is any more faithful than the other. And Jesus is not really talking about gender-specific behavior. In other words, by encouraging Mary in her attentiveness to his teaching, Jesus is rather making clear, crystal clear, that discipleship is not gender bound. Discipleship is a calling for men and women alike.

So just what is Jesus talking about when he tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better part? To get to the heart of the matter, let's take a closer look at exactly what prompted Martha to complain to Jesus, and what Jesus observed in Martha's behavior to lead him to respond as he did. We read that Martha was *distracted* by her many tasks and when Jesus responds he says that Martha is worried and *distracted* by many things. "Distracted" is the key word in understanding this story. It wasn't the tasks themselves that led to Martha's exasperation. And it wasn't the scurrying around in carrying out the tasks that Jesus references. Think about it for a moment. The tasks that Martha were doing were tasks that she had been doing for as long as she could remember—cooking, cleaning, straightening, setting and preparing. Presumably she was so accomplished at them that she could probably do them in her sleep. It was her worry and distractedness that got the best of her. The focus of her attention was less on the tasks at hand and more on the anxiety and worry that they fostered in her demeanor. Perceptive as he is, Jesus observes this as well and gently tells her that in her distraction her sharp focus had been dulled. In contrast Mary's sharp and clear focus was on Jesus. Her focus was not on being a non-worker or lazy or a slacker, letting her sister do all the work. Her focus was on her Lord.

So if we look at the work that Martha was doing, Jesus was not condemning the work or suggesting that it was unimportant. For those looking for an excuse to not help with the next church dinner or potluck—a sort of “get out of church work free card,” this story is not going to fly as a rationale for an excused absence. Sorry. All kidding aside, we who do the church’s work today know that there are lots of tasks to be accomplished, with a seemingly endless list of things to do to keep the church running and operating smoothly. And these tasks are not mindless busywork either—tasks like visiting the sick and the homebound, providing meals to those in need, teaching our children and youth, working to keep our Rockhaven Camp in tiptop shape so the campers can meet Jesus, leading in worship, singing, ushering, preparing meals for potlucks at Rockhaven and in town. The list goes on and on. What the story of Martha and Mary teaches us is that when the work—the tasks at hand—become the focus of our attention to the point of distraction, the sharp focus on why we are doing the tasks—namely to live out our faith in Jesus and to glorify God is dulled.

It’s important for us in our individual lives as disciples of Jesus as well as our collective life as a church of disciples that we strive to stay at the feet of Jesus, listening attentively to his teaching. Pastor Cynthia Jarvis puts it this way. “[W]hen a congregation is led to position itself at Christ’s feet—reading Scripture together and asking after its meaning, listening to substantive sermons and wrestling like Jacob for God’s blessing, studying and nurturing a faith that seeks understanding—then even the details of the common life [of a congregation] begin to resound with good news.” (*ibid.* p. 264)

It reminds me of the choices that we make each day to be faithful disciples of Jesus. Remember those 6 marks of discipleship we emphasized last fall? By choosing to pray daily, worship weekly, read the Bible regularly, serve at and beyond the local church, nurture spiritual relationships with others, and give of my time, talent and resources, this prescription for discipleship will keep our focus sharp so that in all we say and do—in word and work, we’ll do in honor of our Lord and Savior Jesus.