

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton WI

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Luke 10:38-42, "Martha, Martha"

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True confessions. I groaned when I saw that the scripture for today was the story of Mary and Martha. It's not the first time this year these sisters have shown up in worship, with their complicated relationship and the exhausting way they are pitted against one another, the way women often are. The way siblings often are. I know that Jesus is without sin, but he clearly did not read *Siblings Without Rivalry*, whose author argues that siblings should never be compared to one another if we want them to have healthy relationships.

Martha starts out annoyed, and I can imagine her annoyance increasing tenfold at the implication that she's doing it wrong, and that her sister is doing it right. Luke ends the chapter here, so we can't know if she stalked back to work, simmering with resentment, or if her distractions fell away as she dropped to the ground beside Mary at the feet of her Lord. Jesus is, after all, no ordinary scold. He speaks with authority and grace. Maybe Martha listened and responded to his challenging words.

Despite my initial groan, every time I ponder this story it moves me. I deeply resonate with Martha's plight. Luke says she's distracted by her many tasks, and I know that kind of distraction. For me it manifests as a sort of overwhelm. A moment of panic where you look at all the things that need to be done and you tell yourself there is no way. It's impossible. There is too much on the proverbial plate. You're doing one thing and you stop partway through because another thing comes up that is more urgent, and then you remember a third thing that you forgot to do yesterday, and then it's the end of the day and you never did have a moment to circle back to finish the first thing that is now overdue. Another ball dropped. Worse yet, another person disappointed. It's exhausting. I realize I am speaking rather autobiographically here, but I know I am not the only one. It's not even a matter of being bad at time management. It's a matter of living in a culture that expects us to do it all. A culture in which there are two socially acceptable answers to the question, "how are you?" The first answer: I'm fine! The second answer: I'm so busy.

So yes, it is easy for me to imagine myself in Martha's sandals. What I won't do is imagine what it would be like if Jesus came to dinner in the midst of my distractions. Because I do not need Jesus to show up for dinner tonight to have my Mary and Martha moment. Every morning, I wake up to a decision: will I, or will I not, sit at the feet of Jesus? I am speaking metaphorically, but there is unquestionably a better part available, a way to set the distractions aside and turn my eyes upon Jesus. This better part is available to all of us – it is as simple as daily prayer. I have done everything I can to make this easy for my easily distractible self. I have a copy of the Celtic Daily Prayer book next to a comfortable chair in my living room at home. I have a copy of the Celtic Daily Prayer book next to a comfortable chair in my study at church. And I have a bookmark on my cellphone that takes me to the Celtic Daily Prayerbook online. If it is not abundantly clear: I have no excuse not to pray Morning Prayer from the Celtic Daily Prayer book - wait for it - Daily. But do I do this? No, my friends, I do not. Which isn't to say I don't pray every day. But that rich, beautiful liturgy slows me down. It pushes my distractions aside and places me squarely at the feet of Jesus, mind and heart and soul listening deeply to what he has to say to me.

Instead, I just hear Jesus smacking his face with his palm and saying, "Katherine, Katherine" as I race to the next thing. *Only, maybe that's not how this goes.*

I encountered a biblical commentary this week that blew up this story for me in the best possible way. Stephanie Sorge writes,

*"We could hear Jesus ...chiding Martha like she is a child: "Martha, Martha!" Or we could note that this is one of just seven times in the Bible when God calls someone by repeating their name. Just before Abraham is about to kill his son, Isaac, God says, "Abraham, Abraham!" As Jacob is on his way to Egypt, to be reunited with his favorite son, the one he had thought was dead, God calls to him, "Jacob, Jacob!" and tells him not to be afraid; God will make Jacob's descendants a great nation. Then, "Moses, Moses!" God calls from the burning bush. God wakes the young boy Samuel from his sleep in the Temple, "Samuel, Samuel!" A little later in this gospel, we'll hear Jesus say, "Simon, Simon!" at the Last Supper, reminding Simon Peter he has prayed for him despite Simon Peter's forthcoming betrayal. Finally, God's voice accompanies a blinding light: "Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" Each of*

*these instances comes at a pivotal point in the lives of some of the most important people in our sacred stories. Each example is accompanied by a call followed by some instruction or admonishment from God.*

*Martha is in the exceptional company of leaders chosen by God for important works of ministry. This is an extension of her call, and the teachable moment she needs to live into it... What if... we hear Jesus say, "Martha, Martha: you are gifted and called to do great works of ministry, but not everything is yours to do. It's more than any single person can do. It's easy to get distracted or overwhelmed. When that happens, focus on love and your relationship with God and with others."*

What an extraordinary move this is, to not stop with the Mary and Martha comparison, but to expand the comparisons to Abraham and Martha. Jacob and Martha. Moses and Martha. Samuel and Martha.

Simon and Martha. And Saul and Martha. Maybe now we can stop patting Martha on the head as if her story is any less significant as these other biblical figures. When we read the scripture in this light, we can't get away with relegating Martha to the kitchen, or shaming her for being a busybody, or leaving her in the shadow of her sister. Indeed, she is "gifted and called to do great works of ministry."

And to do what she is called to do, she needs to have clarity and faithfulness. She needs to receive wisdom and guidance. She needs to be rooted and grounded in her deep love of God and neighbor. Even, I suppose, the neighbor that frustrates her most.

The commentary asked, "What if we hear Jesus say, "Martha, Martha," – and all the richness the repetition of her name evokes. What if we quiet our minds and bodies and spirits enough to hear God say our own names? Names are powerful. It is why the pastors ask the parents during the covenant of baptism, "by what name shall your child be called?" Names are sacred. Harper, Harper. Jerry, Jerry. [Susan, Susan.] [\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_]. And when you hear your own sacred name whispered by the still small voice of God, what is the message that follows? What deep wisdom is imparted when you slow down and listen?

Or maybe I have this all wrong. Maybe we need to rewind the story to the eye of the storm, and remember the question

Martha asked Jesus. "Lord, do you not care?" It's a nervy way to address the Son of God, but I appreciate her honesty. Her prayer does not mince words. This isn't the only time in scripture Jesus gets asked this impertinent question. When the disciples think their boat will sink in the squall while Jesus sleeps, they wake him up with the accusation that he does not care.

One storm was personal and metaphorical; the other was quite literal. But both triggered desperation and fear. Both made it impossible to pretend that everything was fine. Both exposed the sort of uncomfortable truths that we are avoiding when we go around telling everyone we're fine. And Jesus spoke Martha, Martha into Martha's storm, not Mary's silence.

So yes, it is good for us to slow down. Living in a state of distraction is good for no one. But whether or not we manage to slow down, I trust that the voice will speak. The wisdom will come. The invitation to deeper faithfulness will emerge. So, let's listen, and heed the call. Thanks be to God. Amen.