

Sermon 3-16-25

Paul Purdue preaching

Maybe five times in my life I've cooked for more than 20 people. But, during seminary, I decided to take our youth group to a Christian Rock music festival, where we camped and cooked in a barely improved farm field with 18,000 other young people and their dedicated adult leaders. After a day of music we retreated to our tents. Have you ever tried to sleep in a room filled with a few thousands people only separated by a few millimeters of nylon? One of my fellow chaperones was a world champion snorer, with such a gift some guys from 7 tents away came offering Christian sympathies. Giving up on sleep before first light, I hustled to the bath house to discover there was no hot water. After some quiet time, I began frying bacon and pan-fried toast on two Coleman stoves. As I finished frying the eggs, a bee stung me right in between two little fingers. Instinctively I smashed the bee into my stomach, only to discover that it was not a bee, but polyester dishrag dangling from my hand that had caught on fire. I smashed a little blue ball of flaming polyester lava into my hand, into my belly button and into my brand new festival T-shirt! What I said next was the subject of my conversations over the weekend. I do not remember exactly what I said, but I wish I had taken one of Heather's famous breath prayers! Whatever I yell at 7:30am to a few thousand religious pilgrims awoke my sleepy teenagers with shock, pious horror and teenage judgement. They only began laughing when I threw down the burning dishrag and stomped it into the dust, while waving my hand as if doing an ecstatic dance, until I plunged it into a cooler filled with ice and Mountain Dews. I learned some things that weekend: do not use a polyester dishrag as a hot pad and that I identify with Martha.

The early Christians met in people's homes not in beautiful buildings like ours set apart for worship. Lydia, a wealthy fashion merchant, pressed the Apostle Paul to help start a church in her home. (Acts 16) Jesus began a kind of home-church movement, never building a church or synagogue, but dining and teaching at the homes of Peter, Zacchaeus, Simon the Leper, Matthew, Martha, tax collectors, sinners, priests and Pharisees. The Book of Acts describes how Christians worshiped "*they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and generous hearts*". In their Luke Commentary, scholars Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington agree that Luke's first readers understood the story of Martha and Mary in their own home-church context.

I once went to a spiritual gifts workshop where they plotted us along a Mary and Martha continuum: faith on one end and works on the other, study or service, prayers or actions, a human being or a human doing. If you are reading along in the "Everything (in) Between" devotional guide, you heard Dr. Mindy McGarrah Sharp share: "*Are you a Mary or a Martha?*" is the wrong question! We are all Marys. We are all Marthas. We need both reflection and action, mediation and works. "The one thing that is needed" is feeding the hungry or sitting as a disciple, but practicing being present with ourselves, God, and our neighbor.

John's Gospel shows us two sisters united and deeply supportive of each other when their brother dies. (John 11) There, a grieving Martha leaves her home meeting Jesus on the edge of town with a seeming accusation: *"Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died!"* Then Martha goes and tenderly brings her sister to Jesus and they all weep. In our story, Martha is frustrated with her sister *"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me."* but living with anyone will lead to some frustrations and disagreements. Disagreement does not make us enemies or rivals. Connie does not like lima beans, that changes nothing between us.

Mary is a disciple. In the Biblical world rabbis sat down in a chair to teach and disciples sat at their feet letting the word fall on them. Mary is a Disciple taking classes. Jesus taught with questions like "who was the neighbor" or "how do you read the law"? Mary is not silent or passive but contributes to the lesson. Two different Marys are among the first Christian preachers, proclaiming the Good News "Christ is Risen" on the first Easter. When Jesus says "Mary has chosen a good portion, which will not be taken away from her" Jesus is affirming that despite the persistent and dedicated efforts of the patriarchy God has always called and is still calling women to lead the church.

Lauren Wright Pittman writes "I believe Jesus is not offering a value judgment between them, but assuaging Marthas worry by affirming that Mary is doing a good portion of the work too. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, a place that was reserved for men... Jesus' response is radical because he affirms she has chosen a good portion of the work, and even though she is not where she is expected to be, no one can take that away from her. Jesus protects her right to assume the position of a disciple."

Martha is a Disciple too. She is the home owner and host of this house-church. John 11 tells us that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister" The Greek word Jesus used to describe Martha's many tasks is "diocania" or "deacon" which means "service, ministering, and promoting religion." Welcoming, housing, and feeding people are ministries. Jesus fed a crowd of 5,000 and made breakfast for the disciples along the Sea of Galilee. (Luke 9, John 21) Does it feel different if we hear Jesus calling out to us *"Martha-Martha, Peter-Peter, Heather- Heather, you are distracted by all the ministry you are doing: only one thing is necessary"*? Have you been distracted by all the things you feel you need to get done? Do you feel overwhelmed by injustices and evils swirling around us? Do you ever grow weary wishing more people would step up, sign up, and stand up? Have you ever shouted from the kitchen "can one of you jokers, get off that couch, and at least set the table?"

Mary is a disciple. Martha is a disciple. We are all Marys and Marthas. Study and service, faith and works, prayer and action are not binaries. James writes of the unity of faith and works: *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Faith and actions work together, faith is made complete by what we do."* Amy Jill and Ben remind us that we cannot really do ministry until we sit at the Lord's feet. How can we follow Jesus if we do not know what Jesus taught? How can we live spiritual lives apart from the spiritual

disciplines? How can we be Christians if we only pray about but never do the things that Jesus did?

The problem is not that Mary is studying or Martha feeding people. The problem is distraction. *Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one.* Martha wants the very best for Jesus. She wants her guests to experience a deep welcome, but her focus on her many tasks has pulled her eyes away from her deeper mission: love, welcome and community. I once coordinated a camping trip in Glacier National Park for 7 adults, and I lost my focus, by focusing on the tasks: what we would eat, where we might go, where we might park, instead of the one thing that was necessary; vacating, honoring each person and being together.

There is a little verse in 1 Thessalonian 5 that reads “pray without ceasing” or “pray continually”. Prayer seasons our words and deeds with the fruit of the Spirit, sprinkling “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” to our actions. (Galatians 2)

But how can we always be praying? The context gives us some clues. *“Siblings in Christ, respect your pastors, think of them with love. Live in peace. Warn the disorderly. Comfort the discouraged. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. Do not repay a wrong with a wrong. Always pursue what is good for everyone. Rejoice. Pray continually. Give thanks. Don’t quench the Spirit. Don’t be dismissive of spiritual messages. Examine everything carefully. Keep what is good. Avoid evil. Greet each other with a holy kiss. Stay dedicated to the God of Peace. Know that The One God, who is calling you, is faithful and will get you to where you need to be.”* All of those actions and attitudes are kinds of prayer. Prayer is maybe simply being open to God in the moment. One of the most topical and powerful and timing theological discussions centered around forgiveness took place while peeling potatoes with a United Methodist Circle.

“Praying without ceasing” may be pausing for a few seconds or minutes and reconnecting ourselves with God, neighbors and ourselves. We exhale our anxiety, our chatter, our cursing and confess “here I am Lord”, “I am feeling this Lord”, “I am.... Lord”. Martha got distracted and focused on her sister and her tasks, but what if she took a breath and was present with God and her own soul? What if Martha remembered, “I am cooking for Jesus!”.

There is a kind of spiritual mastery when we learn to let go of the moment, our anxiousness, or desire to produce results (Luke 6) and just do the good we feel God’s leading us toward. What if Martha breathed and prayed “Lord my sister... Jesus, you’re sitting there too.... Lord,...”. Luke leaves the story open, allowing us to do some holy day-dreaming about the one necessary thing.

What if Martha cast her concerns upon God and owned her own feelings and needs? What if she stepped out of the kitchen and said: “Hey I am fixing an amazing dinner and I need a little help in the kitchen” Maybe Peter and John, having heard some of the

stories before, jumped up and helped Martha out? Luke 22 tells us they cooked the Last Supper. Maybe Jesus moved into the kitchen? I imagine someone helped Martha and I like to think Jesus and Martha sat drinking coffee into the wee hours of the morning laughing about the burdens of ministry.

We are all Marthas. We are all Marys. We need both faith and works: prayers and actions: time spent sitting at Jesus' feet and time being Jesus' hands out in the world. And as we live, let us keep returning to prayer: where we realign, remember, recenter, and reconnect with the weightier matters of faith, hope, peace, justice and love. Amen

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