

A DISTRACTED SAINT

(05/13/12)

Scripture Lessons: Luke 10:38-42
John 11:1-6, 17-27; 12:1-8

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.” (Luke 10:41-42)

On Mother’s Day I sometimes preach about one of the women of the Bible. Today we turn our attention to Martha, the sister of Lazarus and Mary, a woman of faith who can serve as an inspiration to and a lesson for not only women but also each and every one of us.

Martha is usually known or thought of as being one-half of the Martha-Mary story, and the lesser half at that. There are three scriptural references to Martha in the New Testament. Luke 10 is the account that is best known. We find a variation of it in John 12, which contains the account of Mary’s anointing of Jesus before his passion.

In both accounts, Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, host a dinner for Jesus. In both accounts, Martha serves. In Luke, while Martha serves, Mary listens to the Lord’s teaching. In John, Mary anoints the Lord’s feet with costly perfume and wipes them with her hair. In Luke, Jesus defends Mary from Martha’s accusation that she is not helping with the preparation of the meal. In John, Jesus defends Mary from Judas’s complaint that the perfume might have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. In Luke, Jesus says that Mary “has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” In John, Jesus tells Judas, “Leave her alone. She bought the perfume so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.”

In both of these passages Jesus seems to be siding more with Mary than Martha and with Mary rather than Judas. The third scriptural reference to Martha appears in the 11th chapter of John, the passage that describes the raising of Lazarus. In this passage Martha plays a much more central role. As we heard this morning, Jesus tells Martha (not Mary), “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” I think it is both interesting and significant that Jesus made this powerful revelation and declaration for the very first time to Martha, not Mary. So Martha, who is often compared unfavorably to her sister, is actually no slouch.

This morning, however, I would like to focus on the passage from Luke and the conversation between Jesus and Martha to see what it might teach us about Martha and about ourselves.

Before I begin, I would like to make one other point about the account of the raising of Lazarus. Martha and Mary send a message to Jesus saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” I think this is an interesting choice of words. A few verses later, John tells us that “though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”

The narrator, who is believed to be the disciple John, describes Lazarus as “the one whom Jesus loves.” He tells us that Jesus loves Martha and her sister. In other passages in the Gospel of John, John refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Could it be that there were two sets of people: those whom Jesus loved and those whom Jesus did not love? Did Jesus have favorites? On what basis would one disciple or one family have become his favorite?

This doesn’t fit my picture of Jesus as loving everyone, even those who dwelt in darkness, whose lives were stained by sin, or those who turned their backs on his teaching. These verses present us with a Jesus who was human, who had feelings, likes and dislikes, just as we do. For whatever reason, John, Lazarus, Martha and Mary were special to Jesus, for I think these are the only people whom he is said to have loved.

Let’s get back to the story of Martha. Lazarus and his sisters are hosting a dinner for Jesus. Mary sits at the Lord’s feet and listens to his teaching. Martha is left alone in the kitchen, preparing the meal, making sure that everyone’s needs are being met. After all, someone has to do it. If Mary pitched in, the meal would be ready in no time. But Mary is oblivious to what needs to be done. It probably doesn’t cross her mind that Martha needs or would appreciate help. Mary has focused her attention on the Lord and his teaching, on the spiritual food, the bread of life, not on the preparations for the dinner.

I can’t read of Martha without thinking of my mother, who passed away only a few years ago. My mom, whose family emigrated from Germany to Canada just before World War I, grew up on a farm in a poor coal-mining town in northern Nova Scotia. My mom, her sister, and her mother worked the farm while Mom’s father and brothers worked in the mines, pursuing a vein

of coal that ran over a mile out under the ocean. I know because Uncle Arthur used to take me down into the mine whenever I would come to visit, much to my mother's consternation.

When I think of my mother, a word that comes immediately to mind is the word "worker." My mom was a lot like Martha. She kept an immaculate house. Like most German women, you could eat off her floor. We couldn't go to church on Sunday mornings unless all the breakfast dishes were washed, dried and put away. Although she wasn't what I would call a good and certainly not a very creative cook, she loved to cook and serve. She liked nothing better than having company and feeding them.

My mom was a lot like Martha. She took good care of her family and her sister Frieda when Frieda got older. If a neighbor were going through a difficult time, without being asked Mom would bring over several meals. She was active in the Women's Fellowship of our church. She was not a thinker. She was not interested in the theological discussions that my father and I would have, and was particularly annoyed when we would come back from church and criticize the pastor's sermon. Mom had a simple faith that found expression in deeds of service.

I also can't read of Martha without thinking of the women of our church. Think of what the women of our church do. They serve on boards and committees, sing in the choir, serve as lay leaders, and teach in the Sunday school. They serve as greeters and ushers, host coffee hours and church suppers, hold church fairs and yard sales, like the one we had yesterday. They support our church financially through their pledges and through the fund raising activities of Women's Fellowship. Perhaps most importantly, they minister to the people of this church as well as the larger community in many different ways. Martha is a symbolic expression of many women in our church.

The two descriptions of a dinner at Lazarus's house, passages that focus on Martha and Mary more than they do on Lazarus, are of little historical significance. I have the feeling that they must have been included as a kind of parable. The gospel writers may have used the contrast between Martha and Mary to teach us something about life, about people, about a part of us, and about our spiritual journey.

We understand Martha's dedication to serving Jesus and the other guests. We also understand her feelings. She would probably prefer to be sitting with her sister at Jesus' feet, but

there is work to be done, and Martha is a worker. Martha's life is guided by the rule that you can take time for yourself only when all your work is done. I suspect Martha is not alone in this.

We can understand and empathize if not identify with Martha. But there is something wrong, not with the choices Martha makes, but with the way she makes them. The lesson is, of course, a lesson in contrast. The different choices of the two sisters, like the different responses of the two thieves on the cross, are meant to raise our consciousness about an important spiritual lesson. What can we learn from looking critically at Martha?

Martha and Mary symbolize two parts or dimensions of the spiritual journey. Mary symbolizes the contemplative life, the inward spiritual journey. Martha symbolizes what is known as the active life, a life devoted to serving others. Both of these dimensions of our spiritual journey are important. The apostle Paul calls us to the contemplative life when he tells us that we are saved by our faith rather than by our works. James, in his letter to the early church, emphasizes the other pole of the spectrum when he extols the merit of serving others. James tells us that a faith that does not find expression in works is an empty faith.

We need to nurture the contemplative side of our spirituality, just as Mary did. However, our faith is meant to lead us into loving service. As disciples and apostles, we are called to be God's hands in the healing of the world. Like Mary, we need to be still and listen to the Word, but we also need to attend to the basic needs of our families, our church, and the world.

Scripture tells us that Martha was *distracted* with too much serving. This is the tip-off that something is wrong. If Martha were serving joyfully, she would not be angry. Anger is a common symptom of burnout. In her distraction, Martha violates a fundamental principle of Buddhism – the teaching that we should be totally present emotionally to whatever we are doing. The Revised Standard Version tells us Martha was “cumbered.” The King James Version tells us she was “anxious.” Both describe her as “troubled.” These feelings are the clues that something is wrong not with what Martha is doing, but with how she is doing it.

Like Martha, we need to look not only at what we do but also at how we do it, at the feelings that accompany our actions. Whether it is the care and feeding of a family, the task of earning the money that is needed to run the home, or the many little projects that need to be done around the church, do we do them joyfully or angrily? If we execute our daily tasks with love in

our hearts, they become an important part of our spiritual journey. If we do them with feelings of resentment, they poison our soul.

Scripture hints that Martha does more than is actually necessary. We are told that she prepares “many dishes.” Whatever the task, I think we would agree that some women or men do more than is really needed. Martha prepares many dishes; a few would probably suffice.

We need to remember that when it comes to caring for our family, for our children, for our elderly parents, more is not always better. We need to maintain a balance between out-put and in-put if we are not to burn out. We can lose our soul in activity, even in highly useful activity. We need to find ways to feed ourselves as well as to feed others. When Martha doesn’t do this, she becomes angry.

The story of Martha and Mary immediately follows the Parable of The Good Samaritan. It is meant as a reminder that the Christian life cannot be reduced to good deeds. Good deeds are important, but they are meant to be expressions of our faith. God knows how important they are, but they are not the central element of our spiritual journey. As Jesus tells Martha, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; *there is need of only one thing.*”

The apostle Paul, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther knew that the central element of our spiritual journey is our relationship with God through Christ. If we have this relationship, a relationship not only of belief but also of love, then the good works we do as an expression of our faith will be done joyfully. If we do not grasp the dimension of faith that was personified in Mary, the one thing that is needful, we will lose a sense of the meaning and the meaningfulness of both our life and our actions.

How will we know when this has happened? We will know when we, like Martha, become distracted, anxious, cumbered, and troubled. We will know when we find ourselves angry all the time at those who are not helping as much as we would like. When we lose our relationship with Christ, we lose the true reason for our work, whether it is ministry or mothering. Our frantic search for the “many things” becomes an ill-advised attempt to fill a spiritual vacuum that has been created because we have failed to grasp and nurture the “one thing.”

Today, on Mother's Day, I would like us to remember Martha, one of the "mothers" of the early Christian church. We need more women like Martha in our church. We, all of us, also need to become the kind of Martha that is tempered by the spirit and the spirituality of Mary.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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