

Sermon: The Better Part
Text: Luke 10:38-42
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Context: WWPC
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But the Lord answered her, “Martha . . . Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Luke 10:4

I was probably ten or eleven years old, sitting in the pew of First Evangelical Free Church alongside my mother, when I heard a preacher tackle this story for the first time.

So I was startled to realize that over the course of my entire eighteen years in ordained ministry, I have not ever preached a single sermon on it.

I was even more startled by my main take away when I read through it again earlier this week.

This well-known story about these two famous sisters with their contrasting priorities, seems pretty easy to interpret. It’s traditionally understood to highlight the difference between mundane practice and spiritual practice, between action and contemplation, between busy and work and restful devotion.

But my first thought after I read through it on Tuesday was that Jesus was obviously never the pastor of a regular church. Because if he had been he would know that sometimes you don’t have a choice.

And least not in a church like ours. For us, to do everything we have to do, everything we need to do, to do everything we *want* to do, to be a gracious church, a welcoming church, a hospitable church, which is to say, to continue to be the church we aspire to be, sometimes you don’t have a choice.

Let me explain.

Last weekend was an unusually busy one for me. I had a graveside committal service on Saturday, followed by our regular worship service on Sunday morning, which was then followed by a memorial service later that afternoon.

Laying our members to rest, and celebrating their lives, and leading Sunday morning worship and preaching from this pulpit -- these things are my duty and my joy. Even fourteen years in, I still feel unbelievably honored that I get to do them.

That said, I'll confess that by the time I got home on Sunday afternoon I was ready for a nap.

But there was one group in the church who worked every bit as hard, if not harder, than I did last weekend.

The members of our Congregation Life Team started to arrived here on Saturday morning right around the same time I did to begin setting up in the parlor for Charlotte's reception.

And most of them, if not all of them, were still here, cleaning up in the fellowship hall after Ron's reception, when I finally went home on Sunday afternoon.

I'm reasonably certain that the demands of getting all that work done made it impossible for some members, if not all the members of the Congregational Life Team, to fully settle in for worship on Sunday morning.

I can imagine the questions running through their minds. *I hope Charlotte's family was happy with the refreshments we served. Oh, and what about the lemonade for this afternoon? I wonder if so and so remembered she signed up to bring pimento cheese sandwiches? Uh oh, did someone remember to wash the tablecloths after the picnic.*

Even now, in 2019, this kind of work, and the preoccupations that go with it, these are most often visited upon the ladies of the church.

And I dare you to suggest to them, as Jesus suggests to Martha, that all their efforts weren't really necessary because, and I quote him verbatim, "there is need of only one thing."

If you do decide to suggest that to them, let me know ahead of time, because I'll be sure to plan to visit you in the hospital.

So it's usually the women folk who occupy the role of Martha in any given congregation. But not always.

On the Sunday of the church picnic four men -- I think that's right --- four men spent at least part of the time they would ordinarily have been sitting in the pews, if not all of that time, outside, firing up the grills and getting ready to turn out enough burgers and hot dogs to feed eighty people.

Now, in terms of the better part, to use Jesus's evocative phrase, I suppose you could argue that hanging out with your buddies outside, while you flip burgers on a grill, is the better part, is more nourishing than suffering through another long-winded sermon from me.

But the point is they did not have the option of deciding that question for themselves.

So to me, and perhaps to most modern readers, suggesting that one has to choose between sweating away in the kitchen or over a hot grill, of sitting in an air conditioned sanctuary is a false choice.

Because if we're going to be the kind of church we all want to be, where people are loved and fed and welcomed and cared for, sometimes you don't actually have a choice.

Hospitality is hard. It doesn't just magically happen. It takes time and effort. Someone has to do the shopping, and someone has to set up the tables and chairs.

Someone has to prepare the grave site at the cemetery. Meanwhile, someone has to set out the cookies and make the coffee back at church. Someone has to cook the burgers and someone has to pour the tea and the lemonade.

And after all is said and done, someone then has to do the washing up and take out the trash.

And if enough people aren't willing to do that -- if at least some people aren't willing to sacrifice their own experience, to miss church or leave a memorial service for a dear friend before we get to the last hymn -- well then the rest of us don't get to eat, afterward, or enjoy fellowship with one another.

We'll just have to go home and we won't get to continue the celebration of our dear friend's life, or share stories of this person who meant so much to us, who always made us laugh. This person whom we will likely miss every day for the rest of our lives.

If this sounds a little heavy-handed -- and I admit, it very well may -- let's put all of this in context and see how it would work back in the day.

Imagine how the disciples might have felt, and how they might have fared, if Martha had taken Jesus's counsel to heart.

Imagine if she had just left the lamb stew uncooked, sitting in a big cold pot over an unlit fire.

Or if she had not thought to set out the mint tea to brew in the sun to day before, or to get the dough for the bread started the night before so it had enough time to rise, or if she had not bothered to peel the lemons to make the lemon bars.

You're right, Jesus. Silly me. There is need of only one thing. From now on we'll just feast on your teachings and we'll be nourished by the living Word you share with us.

I imagine the disciples might have been more than a little miffed had Martha taken Jesus counsel to heart and left them to fend for themselves on the leftovers in the kitchen.

In fairness, Martha herself might not have been so miffed. Perhaps the greatest value of this story is that Jesus gives her, and really gives every woman, permission to step out of her role as maidservant, out of the confines of the kitchen, and to take her place among the men-folk.

At the time, that is an absolutely revolutionary suggestion and it would have given the commentators on the Jerusalem desk of Fox News reason to wonder if Jesus was really a socialist at heart who hates Israel.

But still, in practical terms, this seems like a story with relatively limited application.

I'd love to think we might someday live in a world where everyone could lay aside all the practical demands required to make it through a day and just sit around in quiet contemplation, listening to an audio version of our favorite book by Barbara Brown Taylor.

That is just not how life works, at least not in this church, or really any church. And it's not how life works at home.

And it's not really how life works anywhere: if one group of people are going to enjoy the gifts of good food and gracious hospitality, someone else is going to have to do the work that makes that happen.

Which is why I'm left to wonder why Jesus chided Martha. It seems like the more sensible thing to do would be to encourage Mary to take a turn in the kitchen.

Or to suggest to Peter, or James or John that they take a turn. Now, that would truly be revolutionary. Or maybe to take a turn in the kitchen himself. (NOTE TO SELF: TAKE A TURN IN THE KITCHEN.) (NOTE TO EVERY MAN IN THIS ROOM: TAKE A TURN IN THE KITCHEN.)

So read one way, this seems like a story with somewhat limited application. Or at least one that must be handled very carefully, so as to not hurt people's feelings.

But what if that's not really about all the work that Martha is doing, and whether all of that is really necessary or whether there might be more important things to attend to.

What if it's really about how that work makes her feel?

"Martha, Martha," Jesus says, fussing at one of his best friends. "You are *worried and distracted* by many things."

As Debie Thomas, my new favorite writer and commentator has pointed out, "the root meaning of the word 'worry' is 'strangle' or 'seize by the throat and tear."

"The root meaning of the word 'distraction' is 'a separation or a dragging apart of something that should be whole.'"

"These are violent words," she concludes. "Words that wound and fracture. States of mind that render us incoherent, divided, and un-whole."

Now, the crux of this story turns on the question of what is this better thing of which Jesus speaks: "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

But before we get there, I think it's important to give some thought to how to avoid the experience Martha is having. This fracturing, this wounding that she is experiencing.

And I think that requires that we ask a more specific question.

With all the work that needs to be done in the church, all the receptions we must host, all the meals we put on in the course of a year.

All the sweeping that must be done, all the graves that must be dug, all the work we still want and need to do to build on what we've started to make our space more welcoming and hospitable.

The effort we must invest to improve and enhance the way we greet and welcome visitors--all the practical stuff we need to do and want to do, all the stuff we're already doing, to be and to become the best church we can be.

The question becomes what is the better part -- for you?

With all the work there is to do in the world outside these doors to advocate for the vulnerable, to resist the shadows that are falling all around us, to feed our hungry neighbors on campus and beyond, to build homes for the homeless, to love our neighbors far way and close at hand.

What is the better part -- for you?

Only you can answer that question.

But I might suggest you approach it by asking another set of question: Does this work feed my soul? Does it give me joy or does it give me grey hairs? Does it give me hope or does it make me anxious?

Does it make me happy or does it make me angry?

Does it make more of me, or does it make less of me?

Cause that's how you'll know what you're called to do, if the work you're doing makes more of you. If it gives you joy. If it helps you to grow and fully live into the person you're called to be.

I think maybe that's the better part.