

“Worried and Distracted”

Luke 10: 38-42

I have to tell you that our God has an amazing sense of irony. It was one of those weeks for me. A week filled with lots of phone calls, lots of meetings, lots of preparation for various events, all crammed into one week. And I know that I was not the only one who experienced this crazy busy church week because I was in a lot of those church meetings and planning times with many of you.

But this craziness of life is not limited to the church. Everyone seems to be feeling the rush of life nowadays with back to school, college move ins, retirement parties, watching children grow up into adults. Life just seems to be flying by in one great big blur.

Ironically enough, now that I think about it, we as a church just finished up a conversation about Sabbath time, a conversation about embracing our call to slow down and rest, a conversation that invited us to slow down and find renewal. Ironically enough, we just finished our Sabbath time conversation with at least two weeks of straight meetings and planning sessions about the various missions of the church.

Ironic isn't it, that in looking back over the last couple of weeks, isn't ironic that when we seem to drift too far into the overwhelming busy life direction, either

as a church focusing solely on mission and ministry or as people simply figuring out the details of our daily planner, isn't it uncanny how when we drift too far into the distracted and worried direction, God gives us a word, calling us to sit down at the feet of Jesus and listen, to sit down and spend time meditating of the Word of God. Isn't it amazing that just when we need it most, God invites us to find rest and renewal once more.

God really does have a wonderful sense of the ironic.

But I have a confession to make. As much as I appreciate God's sense of timing and believe me I'm a big fan, I have a confession to make. This story of Mary and Martha has never been one of my favorites. Every time I read it, I come away with the feeling that I lack something or that there are "Other" people who are better than me when it comes to practicing the faith. These other people have got it all figured out, while I'm over here, just trying to remember, day in and day out, the very simple, life transforming fact that "I am God's Beloved" in the midst of the messiness of life.

I'll be honest, every time I read this text, I come away feeling like a failure, always struggling to find the Good News. Every time I read this text, I come away feeling like it is never possible to get this faith thing, this discipleship thing right.

However thankfully, over the years, I have learned and experienced that our God is not a God that guilts us or berates us into following Jesus. As we have

talked about before, we all know that type of hard hearted leadership never really works because it is fear based. In the end, this type of guilting leadership does more harm than good, leading us to experience things we know are not of God.

In fact, we know quite the opposite. We know our God is a God of grace, a God of love and that these things, things like love, grace, hope, compassion, these things should always, and must always be our starting points for our conversations of faith.

So keeping that in mind, I want us to take another look at this text, this time, looking at it through the eyes of love and grace, knowing that this text is not pointing out the areas in which we lack. Rather this text is an invitation to find a balance in our lives as we strive to become the people God created us and calls us to be.

Here's why I'm asking this of all of us, including myself. Here's why I'm asking everyone to give this Scripture a second chance. Because as people of faith, we know that we cannot pick and choose the Scriptures we like. We cannot choose the Scripture that we want to follow while ignoring the ones we like to pretend were never written. All of it together is God's Word for the People of God.

So when I reach this point of frustration with a text, you know the point where I am not exactly sure where and how the Holy Spirit will lead me beyond my confusion, I remember that we need to look at all these verses in context. We

need to take a look at what comes right before and what comes right after our particular verses of Scripture. We need to experience the whole story.

When we do that, we realize that this text is part of a larger narrative that is known as the “travel narrative”. Jesus has set his destination towards Jerusalem and the journey to the cross has begun. In the sections of Luke that proceed our text, Jesus has been talking and strongly encouraging his disciples to place their focus on God and God’s presence in their life. He does this by teaching them about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and how being a disciple shapes our core identity.

Luke then follows up this teaching about discipleship with Jesus’ conversation with the lawyer, introducing the Parable of the Good Samaritan. As we may remember, in that parable, Jesus challenges his disciples to recognize that the grace of God, that the love of God calls all of us to see everyone as our neighbors, showing acts of compassion and love to all of God’s children.

Which brings us to our text today. In this story of Mary and Martha, we are invited and welcomed, along with Jesus and his disciples into Martha’s home. We can see that Jesus is being treated as a special guest.

The interesting thing about this story is that only the Gospel of Luke tells this particular story of Mary and Martha. Sure, we meet them in other Gospels, say

the Gospel of John, but in those narratives, we really don't get to have a meet and greet with them. We are only introduced to them. In fact, in all the other instances where Mary and Martha are mentioned, they serve as ways to help move the story along. They are not the main characters like they are here in this particular story.

The other interesting thing is that when we look at this text, this story of Mary and Martha, we assume Martha is running around preparing a meal, cleaning the house, setting the table, doing all these things to get ready so she can really welcome Jesus into her home. But really the text doesn't say anything like that.

In fact, the word used to describe her actions is the Greek word, diakonia, the same word that we translate as deacons. In church language, that's the diaconate, which basically means the group of people that are the "hands" of the congregation. In life of the Church, it is this group that has been called as the servant leadership of the congregation, helping with the preparation and serving of the Lord's Table, helping set up the space for worship, helping in the looking after the needs of the sick within the congregation. As I said, they are the "hands" of the church.

So really what Martha may have been doing instead of what we assume, you know, going around like a chicken with its head cut off, worried about making sure

the tablecloth matched the napkins. What Martha really was doing was feeding the hungry, making blankets for the poor, maybe even building a house for Habitat for Humanity. Martha, as the hands of the congregation was living out her faith. She was being a servant leader of the church. She was doing the important work of mission and ministry, which we all know is a huge piece of our calling as disciples here on earth.

The other thing that we need to realize is that Luke follows up all the previous verses about discipleship, including the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha with a story about prayer, specifically the Lord's Prayer. In the following verses to the Mary and Martha text, Luke tells us that the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. Jesus does so by giving them the words of the Lord's Prayer so that the disciples may say this prayer as a way to center themselves in the presence of God.

By placing the Mary and Martha between these two texts, the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the teaching of the Lord's Prayer, Luke is reminding us that the Christian life is a both/and journey. It is made up of words and deeds as well as prayer. We must take the time to find the balance for both spiritual things and service in our lives and in our faith.

Or let me say it this way. Last fall, I was able to hear Shane Claiborne, a peace activist and founder of the Simple Way, a community in Philadelphia that is working with neighborhoods to help create the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

Shane tells the story of how when he was a young college student with, his words, not mine, “with stars in my eyes and enough innocence to believe I could change the world on my own”, he dropped out of school and headed to India to go and learn with Mother Teresa. Shane shared that he was ready to go out and change the world and he just know Mother Teresa would give him the keys to how to do exactly just that.

So he arrives in India, ready to change the world. But on his very first day, as he was getting ready to head out to the streets of Calcutta, Mother Teresa tells him he is not allowed to go outside. Now he assumed that it was because of logistics, you know, he didn’t have the right paper work or that he hadn’t been told where to go yet. So he asked what he needed to do to be ready to go out and serve. Instead of answering his question, Mother Teresa leads him to the chapel and simply says, “Pray”.

Shane shared that he was angry and frustrated in that moment. All he could think about was that he traveled half way around the world, ready to make a difference, to learn for Mother Teresa herself on how to bring healing and wholeness to the poorest of the poor, and all she could say was, “Pray”.

This routine went on for days and weeks. Every time Shane would get ready to go out into the streets, Mother Teresa would say, “You are not ready. Go and pray”.

Then finally, one day Mother Teresa came to him and said, “Now you Go outside. You are ready”. Shane asked what was different about today.

To which Mother Teresa replied, “The world is a dark place. There is much hurt on the streets. There is much desperation on the streets. If a servant of God goes out into the streets without first having a vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation,[if you aren’t feed and nourished by God’s word], [if you don’t open yourself to God’s presence through prayer and meditating on God’s word, then] you can’t get up every day and work in it. You won’t have strength for the journey. You won’t have the energy to be the hands and heart of God in this world.

For Shane, he said that this was his Karate Kid type of moment. All the time, while he was frustrated about not being able to go out and make a difference in the streets, Mother Teresa was acting like Mr. Meogi, teaching him the skills, wax on, wax off so that when it came to seeing the vision of God’s healing and wholeness, he was ready for the journey.

As people of faith, Jesus reminds us that we are on a both/and journey: A journey that is filled with loving our God with all our heart, mind, soul, filled with

loving our neighbor as ourselves as well as having our spirits being nourished and feed until we are filled with God's word of love, God's word of grace, God's word of grace. This is what sustains us and gives our service meaning. This is what gives significance to our actions and our deeds as people of faith.

God's word gives our lives meaning and purpose. Jesus is telling Martha, telling his disciples, telling us this morning is that at the core of our faith, is our connection to and with God's word. It is the one thing that will sustain us. It is the one thing that will give us energy for the journey. It is the one thing that never fades away or that can be taken away. It is the one thing that is abiding in this temporary world.

Through these words to Martha, Jesus issues an invitation for all of us to realize that we cannot bring about the Kingdom of God on our own. God will do that in God's time. What we as people of faith are called to do in the meantime is to find ways to sustain our Spirits while we continue helping with the work of God. Too often, "our occupations and preoccupations have filled up our lives to the brim and they prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives."

It is not one or the other. We are called to find a balance of spiritual and service in our lives, in our faith as we continue to become the people of love and

compassion this world needs us to be. We need Martha's activism supported and sustained by Mary's meditation on God's Word. We also need Mary's intense focus in prayer which inspires Martha's servant leadership as we continue to do the work of the Kingdom of God.

One of the commentators gave an alternate ending to this text that looks beyond my frustration and confusion with this text and reclaims Luke's original intent for this story. The commentator said that when Martha came to Jesus to complain about Mary's lack of work, Jesus invited Martha to come and have a sit. Jesus invited Martha to come to the table and be nourished, to come eat the main course of grace, love, and acceptance, and then following the meal at God's table, Jesus invited all, including Mary to come along to do the dishes, to feed the hungry, to make care-packages for the homeless shelter, now that they were satisfied and fulfilled.

As people of faith, we are told the Scriptures say that we are to Love our God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul. As people of faith, we are told the Scriptures also say that we are to Love your neighbor as yourself. It is not an either or. It is a both and. And it is up to us to live out this balance as we

continue striving to be the people God created us and calls us to be. May it be so.

Amen.