

Four Things
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Text: Luke 10:38-42

Contemplatives of the world, rejoice!

Today Jesus commends you.

Today Jesus says to you and Marys everywhere,

“You are doing the right thing.

Stay seated;

don’t get up;

don’t let those edgy *hausfraus* pressure you into scurrying about.

You have chosen the better part.”

What a refreshing and relevant message *today* for those who struggle to live a sane life in the midst of our workaholic American society. The U.S. is comprised of millions of Marthas. The United States is renowned among industrialized nations for NOT cutting our annual works hours within the last half century.

As long ago as 1840, a Frenchman (Alexis de Tocqueville) wrote of:

“the *feverish ardor with which Americans pursue their own welfare*,”

and referred to:

“*this strange unrest of so many happy men,
restless in the midst of abundance.*”

An academic paper was put out by professors from the University of Texas and the University of Michigan in 2005.

Their argument was rooted in understanding that negative effects of workaholism are similar to the negative effects of drinking and smoking as they impact those in the addict’s community. The paper was titled, “The Economics of Workaholism”, with the guilty subtitle of “We Should not Have Worked on this Paper”. :)

Work.

We love hard workers.

They make great employees.

They get a lot done.

Their obituaries are full of accolades.

So, what's up with Jesus? He shows up in this story as a rude guest to the hard-working Martha.

This text emerges as one part of a travel narrative toward the end of Jesus' ministry. He's been on the road for quite a while. You would think he would appreciate Martha's good intentions. She wants Jesus to *relax*. She wants Jesus to be *well-fed and rested*. She wants to be a really good host to this special friend.

She's actually subscribing to the expectations of the day: hospitality is of utmost importance. The table isn't going to set itself, right?!

Jesus' chastisement of Martha flies in the face of the verse that precedes this story. The very last thing we hear Jesus say before he arrives at Martha's home is:

"GO and DO likewise."

He was speaking to his disciples and telling them to emulate the Good Samaritan. GO and DO.

Action words.

He was affirming hospitality and social action; NOT just sitting around.

And now, in the course of a few verses, Jesus doesn't affirm Martha's work.

Many people interpret that Luke intentionally put the Good Samaritan text and the Mary/Martha text together to demonstrate the need for *balance* in the Christian life. When this today's text is put into its full context, we don't find an either/or option. In fact, immediately following this Mary/Martha story, Luke reports on Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray. In teaching his disciples, Jesus brings action and devotion together... DO this: PRAY.

Reading the whole of Luke's travel narrative, we find Luke promoting a balanced life. There is a widespread understanding that Luke is taking a "both/and" stance: "Action and Stillness".

This view is not new.

In Elisabeth Moltmann's book, "The Women around Jesus", she cites a reformation-era hymn which picked up the theme of "both/and" with this verse:

Martha and Mary in one life

Make up the perfect vicar's wife.

Wellllllllll... even if we don't agree with *that*, we may agree that Luke's overall message is **Doing and Devotion**

That's a nice message.

And we've heard it a million times:

"A Balanced Life" - or some derivative of it.

And if that's where the lesson of this text ends, well...

I am left feeling very frustrated. Because

We who are active *know* that we should take time away for quiet and rest. But many of us are absolutely terrible at carving out the time for that. When we sit down to pray our minds wander. Our body won't settle. No matter how often we try to listen to Jesus, Jesus doesn't seem to speak... or, at least, we don't HEAR anything.

And we who love to be quiet and still are not naturally skilled in active engagement. We don't think like an activist. We don't have eyes that automatically translate our perceptions into a "to do" list. We don't automatically get up and go.

I need to hear *more* than the lesson to which LUKE seems to point.

Where I find that "more" is in the critical conversation between Martha and Jesus.

Here, I find practical insights that may help us begin to IMPLEMENT Luke's encouragement toward balance.

Read verse 40 again:

But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

THIS is what launches Jesus into (what many interpret as) his scolding.

His comments actually have little to do with Martha's activity, but rather the manner in which she goes about her activity.

There are four things that I detect in Martha which cause Jesus to tell Martha to chill. And I think if we stay attuned to these moments in ourselves, we can receive our own warning signal that tells us we need a time out at Jesus' feet.

1. Martha is frantic and resentful

There's a lot going on in Martha in that moment. The word "distraction" here means: "pulled in many different directions", "over occupied", Jesus says Martha was "worried".

It seems as though many of us live in a constant, frenetic state of mental activity: our thoughts race between our calendars, to-do lists, social activities, what we'll eat for dinner, work demands, family problems, chasing Pokemon, and all other manner of activity.

You get it.

This is the tortured, draining state Martha was in. It is hard to be a gracious presence when we are in this state, and we can begin to be resentful – especially toward people who don't seem to care.

We offer a service, but are irked when there is no "thank you" given or no progress made.

We feel as though people are taking us for granted.

But we can't stop giving.

Because if we stop, NO ONE Else will do it!

Or, It Won't Be Done Correctly.

WHICH LEADS TO MORE FRANTIC ACTIVITY.

In Jesus' affirmation of *Mary*, I'm hearing him say to Martha: "Don't overestimate the importance of your perfect hospitality. I'm fine with a glass of water. Oh, and I can get it myself."

When we slow down (even a wee-bit) and note our resentment, we can more actively ponder its' legitimacy and how we are willing to deal with it.

2. Martha has adopted a "victim mentality".

The victim mentality can be born of resentment. Martha is obviously angry that her sister is not pulling her fair weight.

But Martha is not being victimized by Mary.

Martha is making the choice to not sit down.

Mary isn't forcing her to do anything.

Yet, in her distracted preoccupation, Martha feels like *Mary* is responsible for her misery.

This is a sign of being off-center: blaming other people for our state of worry or our over-worked state.

3. **Martha tries to throw a guilt trip on Jesus**

Martha appeals to Jesus through appealing to his sense of care for her! “Jesus, do you not CARE that my sister isn’t helping?!”

So now it’s a test for Jesus: Don’t you CARE?
Don’t you LOVE me?

If you Cared, Lord, you would take my side.

This is just dirty pool, and I’m glad Jesus didn’t fall for it.

If we ever find ourselves saying, “If you *cared* about me, you would...” we know we are treading in unhealthy waters. We can not prescribe for other people how they must show their love for us. Surely we can state our needs and desires like: “I feel cared for when people _____”. At least then a dialog can take place.

Obviously Jesus cared deeply for Mary and Martha – they were among his best friends. Martha was a faithful disciple, active in hospitality and devotion. In this story, we catch her in a bad moment. A part of Jesus’ care for Martha was confronting her.

Are there moments you find yourself feeling like people don’t CARE about you because they don’t agree with you?

When someone confronts us, let us try really, really, really hard to consider that it may be done out of good intentions, and not automatically assume it’s out of a lack of care.

4. **Martha triangles Jesus into her frustration.**

Did you notice that Martha doesn’t say, “Mary, I could use some help.”
Martha doesn’t speak to Mary at all!

Martha instead goes to Jesus and asks him to take her *side*.
So, let’s talk about taking sides.

Clearly, Jesus took sides. He took the side of the poor and the oppressed. And he asked *others* to take the side of the downtrodden.

We humans try to get people to take our side over issues that have nothing to do with Christ's critical mandates. If our perceived threat can be neutralized with strong alliances, we feel a sense of security.

Just think of how this story would have sounded if Jesus replied to Martha, "Thanks for pointing that out, Martha. Mary, I agree with your sister. Now get off your duff and get back in the kitchen."

Martha may have been pleased, but Mary would have been hurt over her action which wasn't at all "morally wrong".

This is the problem with taking sides in regards to preferences: It is inherently exclusive and divisive.

Taking sides only creates a wider divide. When people are divided "over/against" each other, a middle way does not emerge. Compromise becomes a dirty word.

So, turn on your inner warning system. In what areas of your life are you hoping that someone will take your side? Almost always, more damage is done when we take sides over issues that Christ doesn't deem "central to the faith".

(pause.)

So there are *four* things - warning signs - that can prompt us toward the *one thing* to which Jesus refers.

You don't have to be a practiced contemplative to follow Mary's way.

Sometimes just taking a deep breath,
sitting still for a moment,
and holding our Martha moments before God
is a good-enough step in following the way of Jesus.

Let's Pray.