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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Luke 10: 38-42

“Distracted to worry, or worried to distraction?”

O God, as the Scriptures are read and the gospel proclaimed, open our ears to hear Your Word, open our eyes to see your truth, and open our hearts to receive your grace.

I'm going to put all of my cards on the table this morning and let you know from the get-go that I think Martha gets a bad rap in today's story.

You see, I like Martha. I can totally relate to Martha. Heck, I *am* Martha. Her values are closer to mine, I'm good at busying myself with many tasks, and I like her better than Mary.

So this story isn't particularly my favorite story.

I learned this past week that I'm not alone in my dislike for this story. John Calvin didn't like it, either. He didn't think it was right that Martha was put down by Jesus.

But my dislike for the story doesn't stem from the fact that I'm more of a doer-type than a contemplative type. I happen to disagree with people who say Martha is criticized for spending too much time in the kitchen and too little at the feet of Jesus. It should be pointed out that Martha was doing exactly what was expected of her-getting dinner ready for the men.

So my dislike for the story doesn't stem from the fact that Jesus seemingly rebukes Martha for doing what she should be doing.

No, my dislike for the story stems from the fact that the real reason Jesus rebukes Martha is that she's worried and distracted and that has gotten in the way of what is most important, which is being truly present with Jesus.

That's why I don't like this story.

Because like Martha, I'm really good at being pulled in many different directions. As a mother of four who works fulltime, it's something I excel in. And that, my friends, is a problem.

But my hunch is I'm not alone. In a culture of hectic schedules and the relentless pursuit of productivity, we are tempted to measure our worth by how busy we are or by how much we accomplish.

Society tells us that if we're busy, we're important. If we're not, we are . . . what is the expression again? Lazy-good-for-nothings, I think we call them.

And we've bought into the myth. We love to tell people how busy we are. "How are you?" we ask someone. And what do they say? "Busy!" I don't know anyone who doesn't say that!

But a recent study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, says we have a faulty impression of how busy we are. The 60 hour work week some people claim to have is more like 45; and the 6 hours people say they sleep is really around 7 ½. But we inflate our numbers, the study concludes, because doing so "shows that we are dedicated to our jobs and our families. Being "busy" and "starved for time" is a way to show we matter. Put another way, it makes us feel important." (Wall Street Journal, "Are You As Busy As You Think?", February 22, 2012)

But as the study points out, lamenting about how busy we are is a sad way of boosting our self-esteem. So instead of complaining, why not keep a time journal to know exactly how we do spend our time, the study suggests, and then make the needed changes. Just like well known diets tell people to keep a food journal so they're aware of what they eat and when and why, this study suggests keeping a time journal. It's a pretty good suggestion, when you consider the fact that Americans now spend 5 hours a day on the internet, a tablet or smart phone, and another 4 ½ watching tv. It's true. Those wasted minutes staring at a screen add up.

Or even better, the study suggests we change our language.

Instead of saying "I don't have time" try saying "it's not a priority," it suggests, and see how that feels. Often, that's a perfectly adequate explanation. For example, instead of saying, I don't have time to exercise, how about saying: I just don't want to.

But of course, as the study points out, other things are harder. Try it: "I'm not going to take a walk with you Charlotte, because I'd rather check my e-mail." Sounds a little harsh, doesn't it? But that's the point. Changing our language reminds us that time is a choice. If we don't like how we're spending an hour, we can choose differently.

You see, Martha did have a choice about how she was going to spend her time. Even though society told her she should be in the kitchen, Jesus thought it was perfectly OK for her to sit with him and take in his teachings. She didn't have to be in the kitchen; she could have chosen differently.

But my guess is Martha liked being in the kitchen and complaining to Jesus about how busy she was, because it boosted her self worth. So after banging around the pots and pans a little too loudly and giving the plates a good thump on the table and not getting the attention she deserves, she goes straight to Jesus with her cry for attention: "Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

She was probably hoping Jesus would then say:

“You’re right Martha. Mary, on your feet. Go in there and help your sister. And what are you doing at my feet? Only disciples sit there, and you know that only men are allowed to be disciples.”

But Jesus doesn’t say that, does he?

Instead he says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

And what is the better part? The better part is to hear from Jesus that we are loved, even treasured, for who we are, not for what we do or how busy we are.

That, my friends, is a message that is worth our time to stop and listen, no matter how busy we think we are. That’s a message worth reminding ourselves of every time we feel frazzled and pulled in a million different directions.

When we feel anxious, and distracted, and pulled this way and that, we need to stop and ask ourselves, “Is this the better part?” Chances are good it’s not the better part if it’s running you ragged.

The good news is, Jesus invites all of us, and perhaps today especially those of us who are worried and distracted by many things, to sit and rest in his presence, to hear his words of grace and truth, to know that we are loved and valued as children of God, and to be renewed in faith and strengthened for service.

There is need of only one thing, and that is to hear from Jesus that we are loved, even treasured, for who we are, not for what we do or how busy we are.

Amen.

In the movie “A Christmas Story”, there’s a scene I love and can relate to so well. In it, Ralphie’s Mom sits down to eat dinner but is immediately asked by the Dad, “Honey, can you get the salt,” and by the kids, “Mom, can I have seconds.” The narrator comments, “My Mom hasn’t eaten a hot meal in years.”

I can relate to that scene so well because it happens to me at almost every meal. One of the kids always wants something the minute I sit down. If I said yes to every request, I’d spend more time jumping up than sitting down.

But apparently, I'm not alone. Because in today's story, Jesus has rolled into town, and, Martha is jumping to attention. She's doing exactly what is expected of her: getting dinner ready for the men.

In a typical Palestinian home of that time period, and we have no reason to believe this wasn't a typical Palestinian home, Jesus would have been reclining on the floor, waiting to be served. Martha, knowing this is the custom, gets busy in the kitchen.

She's preparing the roast, mashing the potatoes, stringing the beans, husking the corn. She's probably making her own pie crust and filling it with something tasty like cherries or blueberries. If she's anything like our modern day Martha (Stewart), she grew the berries and cherries in her backyard.

But long before she started all the cooking she had to make sure her house was clean, too. She's scrubbed it from top to bottom. She's dusted, vacuumed, cleaned bathrooms, scrubbed floors, made beds, and put away toys. Martha doesn't take any short cuts; throwing everything into a closet and praying no one will see what's in them is not what she does.

And she wants her table to look nice, too. So she's pulled out her best stuff. And you know when you pull out your best stuff it needs a little freshening up. Because, let's face it, we only use the good stuff once a year. It gets a little dusty in the back of the cabinet. So it too needs to be wiped down. And all that silver needs to be polished. And all those linens need to be ironed.

Martha has worked herself into a tizzy getting ready for Jesus, so imagine her surprise and anger when she notices, out of the corner of her eye, her younger sister Mary sitting at Jesus' feet. Mary, her good for nothing little sister is sitting doing nothing while she, Martha, is working herself to the bone.

Martha, taking matters into her own hands marches into that living room and says to Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." *Lord, do you not care?*

If there was ever an anxious person, Martha is it. "Lord, do you not care?"

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part."

Friends, I know many of you have heard this story many times. But please note that Jesus is not telling Martha that a life of learning is better than a life of serving; Jesus is not telling Martha that a life of contemplation is better than one of hospitality. This is not a contest about who is the better and more faithful disciple.

Jesus is not reprimanding the Busy Martha, he is speaking to the Worried and Anxious Martha. He is speaking to his dear friend Martha, who has worked herself into a state of anxiety. She has placed all of her anxiety on her sister and now on the very one she calls Lord. Jesus is telling her to refocus because her anxiety is not only getting in her way but also God's way.