

July 20, 2025

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Genesis 18: 1- 10a & Luke 10:38-42

Distractions and Anxieties

The Gospel of Luke is traditionally divided into seven sections. Our scripture this morning comes from the middle or hinge section. Chapters 1 - 9 tell of the coming of Jesus, his birth story, the beginning of his ministry and his ministry traveling around the Galilee region. In Chapter 10 Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem. This section lasts nearly 10 chapters and includes a good chunk of Jesus' teachings. Jesus teaches about what it means to be his disciple and how to pray. He teaches about the Kingdom of God and about giving of ourselves to God. This section also includes a number of healings and many of the parables that are so beloved, parables about being lost and found, rich and poor, prayer and repentance. This section ends with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by the last three sections of the Gospel of Luke that share the passion narrative, Jesus' death, and the post-resurrection narratives, scriptures that we heard throughout the spring. So I invite you to hear our scripture this morning through the lens of a turning point in Jesus' ministry, when Jesus' teaching took on added weight and significance as he knew what lay ahead and as he was seeking to prepare his disciples for their journey ahead. Hear now these words from Luke chapter 10:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." **The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.**

"Are you a Mary or a Martha?" This is a question many women in church circles have been asked. I distinctly remember the first time I was asked that question. I was new to the community, having just moved to Louisiana. I joined a PW (Presbyterian Women) Circle at the church I was attending, hoping to build some closer friendships in the large church. It was the "Nighttime" Circle, that is the Circle for women who worked. It was 2003 and the book *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* by Joanna Weaver had recently been released in paperback and the book was at its height of popularity. It has sold over one million copies and is on Amazon's best-seller list in the category "Christian living-women's issues."¹ Multiple Bible studies had sprung up around this scripture. If you Google "Are you a Mary or a Martha?" you will see blog posts galore with reflections, mostly from women, on this question.

¹ <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/having-a-mary-heart-in-a-martha-world-by-joanna-weaver>; <https://www.amazon.com/Having-Finding-Intimacy-Busyness-publication/dp/B003HZUI1Q>

“Are you a Mary or a Martha?” I was asked. It was not a hostile question, more a question of curiosity. Should we invite you to join the prayer team or the kitchen helpers? I have to admit I was baffled by the question. I had not read the book – it was apparently not a thing at the church I attended in Minnesota before moving. I was familiar with the scripture passage, but was unsure how to answer the question, especially not wanting to offend my new church friends. So I took the easy way out and said that I was both a Mary and Martha. In high school, I participated in the pray and meditation group at my church – me and a bunch of what I thought of as older ladies, who I am positive are younger than I am now. So I had been doing what would be known as Centering Prayer for years. And I had been active in service and teaching work, chairing the Mission Committee at my last church and serving as a Sunday school teacher and confirmation mentor. The ironic thing about the question I was asked was that the women in that group were also both Marys and Marthas. Some were in the *Lectio Divina* group I eventually joined, and they also helped out in so many ways around the church. I also found it ironic that it was women who were asked this identity question. To my knowledge no one has written a book asking men “Are You a Peter or a Paul?” or “Are You a James or an Andrew?”

So why the fascination with question? Biblical historians and theologians have written tomes on this passage, especially related the role of women in the church. As Biblical scholars Jane Schaberg and Sharon Ringe note in their commentary on this text: “One traditional interpretation sees the two women as abstract principles or types. For example, they are said to represent active and contemplative lifestyles, or justification by works and justification by faith Another approach pays attention to the fact that the protagonists are women and attempts to read the story in terms of female careers or priorities or jealousies. Some see here a feminist manifesto of the rights of women to theological education. Jesus defends Mary's right to study with him. His action is often contrasted -incorrectly- with the denial of the right of Jewish women to study Torah. But no such rule existed in Jesus' day...Recently the narrative has been read by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as reflecting a debate at the end of the first century CE, both over the roles of women and over emerging offices in the house churches, some of which were founded and led by women.”²

More recently, scholars have focused on the meaning of two specific words to better appreciate the passage. The first is the word that is translated as “tasks” and “work” in verse 40: “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?” The Greek word used here *diakoneo*, the root of the word for the Deacon, and is most often translated as “serving.” As scholars note, the Gospel of Luke consistently praises those who serve Jesus. And while this term can refer to providing “table or meal service,” it is more generally used to lift up, and

² Jane D. Schaberg and Sharon H. Ringe The Gospel According to Luke. *Women's Bible Commentary. Revised and Updated*. Carol A. Newsom, Shaon H. Ringe, & Jacqueline E Lapsley (eds.) Westminster John Knox, 2012 p.507-508.

praise, broad types of service in the name of Jesus – what we would call being the “body of Christ.” So it would not be in Jesus’ keeping to chide Martha for her service work, when Jesus describes himself as a servant, and encourages others to do likewise.

The emphasis on “diaconal” ministry – or the ministry of service and hospitality is a focus from the beginning to the end of scripture. We heard Judi read the passage from Genesis 18 where Abraham was in total “Martha-mode” running to meet the men passing by. He brought them a bowl of water to wash their feet and guided them to rest under a tree. He not only had Sarah make fresh bread for them, he had a tender calf prepared for them, along with curds and milk, providing quite the feast. Now I do want to note that while Abraham gets the credit for all of the hospitality, it was his wife Sarah and his servant that do most of the heavy lifting. That is a sermon for another day. Nonetheless, this passage from Genesis is often lifted up as a hallmark of hospitality, so much so that the book of Hebrews 13:2 references this passage: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

The second word that scholars have focused on is the language Jesus uses in response to Martha’s quip to Mary about her lack of help: “But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one.” The verb that is translated as “distracted” is *perispaomai* and has a literal meaning of drawing away from or to drag around so as to be out of place. And the Greek word translated as *worry* is *thorybazo* and this is only place it used in the New Testament. It means to be anxious, troubled or disturbed.³ So what do we make of this? As Biblical Studies professor, Matthew Skinner notes, “When Jesus praises Mary’s having chosen “the better part” (v. 42), he refers to her singular focus on Jesus himself. ... To be genuine, acts of discipleship whether contemplative, active, or anything else need to maintain such a focus. Martha’s problem is that her service strays from attending to its rightful object of devotion, the Lord Jesus.”⁴

Distractions and anxieties. It is not just Martha who falls prey to that. I know I certainly do. It is so easy for me to get pulled out of my focus by the ding of a text or the ringing phone. Or the email notice that flashes across my screen. Or the latest social media post or news headline instead of focusing on what I am reading or writing, I am drawn away, just like Martha is.

One of the books I read while I was discerning my call to ministry was *The Awakened Heart* by Gerald May. In it May reflects about the value of moving from a mode of efficiency to one of love. Or replacing the value of efficiency with the value of love. As someone whose to-do list has always been longer than the number of hours in a day, that was a radical concept for

³ Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; James Strong. *Greek Strong’s Dictionary*; LEH Septuagint Lexicon. Accessed through Accordance Bible Software 13.3.2., Oaktree Software, October 2021 update.

⁴ Matthew L. Skinner. Luke 10:38-42. Exegetical Perspective. *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C. Volume 3.* David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (eds). Westminster John Knox Press; 2010. P267

me. And there are many days when it still is. I re-read that book – or at least that chapter – at least once each year. It is a reminder for me to be ok when a meeting runs long because people are sharing what is on their heart. To celebrate when something is unfinished because there were unexpected conversations to be had. To revel in the untidiness of love – love that doesn't come on a schedule and can't always be squeezed into a bullet point on an agenda or five minutes between events. It is a reminder to me that I need to confess my frustrations with a world where love is rarely efficient; to confess my failure to embrace the love God made flesh in the Christ-child while I am efficiently racing to establish a beautiful and orderly worship service. That hospitality often happens in the unplanned interruptions.

I'm guessing Abraham didn't get up that morning thinking he was going to feed strangers walking on by. And yet that interruption was an affirmation of the covenant God made with him, as the parting words from one of the strangers was, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." I don't know whether Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha was planned or not; whether they had it on the calendar for months or whether Jesus (with the disciples in tow) happened to just stop by. I tend to think it was the latter, hence Martha's focus on getting the household ducks in a row. But Jesus wanted to hang with his friends and wasn't worried if all the cobwebs were out of the corners and the stew wasn't quite ready. It wasn't what Martha was doing that was the issue, it was Martha's focus on the outward manifestations of what others might think, rather than enjoying the moment for what it was.

Whenever I get into one of those states, where my focus is out perspective, I turn to Psalm 23. For many people the 23rd Psalm is a prayer that provides great comfort in times of difficulty and grief. I have to admit that as much as I use it in pastoral care, the 23rd Psalm really doesn't really speak to me personally. Or at least it didn't until I stumbled on a contemporary version by the Japanese poet Toki Miyashina. Somehow the imagery used in this version speaks into my life in ways the traditional version does not.

The Lord is my Pace-setter, I shall not rush;
God makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.
God provides me with images of stillness,
which restores my serenity.

God leads me in ways of efficiency
through calmness of mind,
and God's Guidance is peace.
Even though I have a great many things
to accomplish each day,
I will not fret, for God's presence is here;
God's timelessness, God's all importance,
will keep me in balance.

God prepares refreshment and renewal in midst of my activity,
by anointing my mind with oils of tranquility.
My cup of joyous energy overflows,
surely harmony and effectiveness
shall be the fruits of my hours,
for I shall walk, in the pace of my Lord
and dwell in God's house forever.⁵

When I am overwhelmed by anxieties and distractions, I remind myself to walk in the pace of the Lord. Not to ask the Lord to walk at my pace, which is my first inclination. My brain wants to say “Hurry up God. There are things that need to be done.” Our scripture this morning and this contemporary version of Psalm 23 remind me that God prepares refreshment and renewal in midst of my activity. I am encouraged to focus and absorb the words of Jesus, to put the distractions and anxieties aside. Jesus encouraged Martha to do likewise. Our scripture doesn't tell us how Martha responded to this request. How will you respond? Join me in prayer.

⁵ For more information on this version, see <https://iamchandralynn.com/tag/toki-miyashina/> and <http://www.playfull.org/2014/08/psalm-23-from-japanese-translation.html>