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Luke 10:38-42
Year C

One day a man comes home from work to find total mayhem at home. The kids are outside, still in their pajamas, playing in the mud and muck. There are empty food boxes and wrappers all around.

As he proceeds into the house, he finds an even bigger mess — dishes on the counter, dog food spilled on the floor, a broken glass under the table, and a small pile of sand by the back door.

The family room is strewn with toys and various items of clothing, and a lamp has been knocked over.

He heads up the stairs, stepping over toys, to look for his spouse. He was becoming worried that she may be ill, or that something has happened to her.

He finds her in the bedroom, still in bed with her pajamas on, reading a book. She looks up at him, smiles, and asks how his day went.

He looks at her bewildered and asks, “What happened here today?”

She smiles and answers, “You know every day when you come home from work and ask me what I did today?”

“Yes,” was his reply.

She answered, “Well, today I didn’t do it!”¹

Ah! We Marthas—how we laugh! WE DO IT ALL—. Until our Mary side rebels and we act out.

And guys I don’t mean to leave you out of this picture—think generic here like when we talk about Peter being a generic representative of all disciples.

So it’s the old Mary-Martha struggle. But is it just about housekeeping, chores or work? Is it just about having too much to do all the time?

¹ Homiletics Illustrations for Luke 10: 38-42, July 22, 2007.

To receive the good news of this old familiar story, we really need to flip back a few pages in Luke and recall another familiar story Jesus told:

The story of The Good Samaritan—What is the message of the Good Samaritan? Somebody tell us.

.....It illustrates the Golden Rule—right? Love your neighbor as yourself—do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Do you recall why Jesus tells this story? (Pause) Because the person who asked wanted to know, “*Who is my neighbor?*”

But we need to remember something else. “Who is my neighbor,” was the man’s second question to Jesus. The first question was, what? Anyone? “*What must I do to inherit eternal life.*” Yes.

And Jesus told him, ‘You know the law—tell me what it says.’ So the man dutifully responded, “*That you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul---and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.*”²

Jesus says, “Good answer! Do it and you shall live.” This is when the man asks the second question—about who his neighbor is ---and so Jesus tells him with the story about the Good Samaritan.

We United Methodists are Good Samaritan Christians. We are hands-on and wallets-out folks. We know how to work and to give to make ministry happen. Its reflexive with us-- Martha is our lady!

So when she says to Jesus, “*Lord, don’t you care that Mary has left me to do all the work! Tell her to help me!*” We know exactly how she feels!

In our eyes, ***Mary isn’t being faithful because she isn’t being helpful.*** Isn’t that implicit in how we UM’s understand discipleship?

² The Message, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase

We say to one another, “O that so and so loves to go to bible studies or prayer groups but never lifts a finger around here!”

Our definition of discipleship has its main emphasis on Martha’s side of the ledger: faithful discipleship is serving; helping.

The Greek in scripture for the word “help” is insightful—its complex and means in English something like, **(Go to library table or altar table)** “Here’s a table that’s too big for me to lift; I need somebody on the other end.”

Mary wants Martha on the other end. Makes sense to us—right? We are always looking for people to help out with the work.

And its good work. Its ministry—helping others—or counting the offering or teaching Sunday School. We need somebody on the other end.

One Christian thinker tells us Paul uses this same term when talking about the Holy Spirit helping us in our prayer. The Holy Spirit will be the Other.

Jesus will be the Other.

The point is, our Mary Martha struggle isn’t only about the work getting done. It’s about selfhood. The self is always going to have this Other over there. And the question for us as disciples is, “Who is it going to be?”

We are Martha faced with the question, “Who’s it going to be, Mary or Jesus?”

“Who’s it going to be, our sister, someone in our own social environment, or Jesus?”

The question is, *who’s going to be the constituting Other in your life*

For Mary, it’s Jesus. For Martha, it’s Mary. The whole problem is right there.”³ “Martha is lost in the horizontal plane of activities.”

All of this works stuff, all of this busyness dominates our lives. Makes us anxious—until it controls us like a task master and we lose track of the Other—with a capital O at the other end of our life table.

I know that’s become true for me in my role as pastor. This year I’ve found myself overworking and controlled by all the must do, must attend, must finish, must drive to’s in my life until I became so anxious and exhausted and irritable here this last month that I ended up sick in bed with a simple virus that hung on for weeks.

I imagined all sorts of horrible possibilities: Valley Fever, West Nile Virus, Lyme Disease, some exotic bug I’d picked up in Korea. But the doctor said, “Overwork—stress. Change your life or plan on an early retirement.”

I went on vacation and recouped and came home clutching this little pink sticky note of new resolves I’d written for myself. It reads: EVERYDAY I will exercise, take time to prepare meals and eat right, and check my email.

Have you ever had to declare email amnesty? People over-whelmed by a gazillion unopened emails—mine number over 600 at the moment-- trash them all and start over! What a freeing idea!

The last thing on my list is, get enough rest. This list sounds good doesn’t it? The majority of busy folks could use a list like this. And that’s what’s wrong with it.

It’s missing something pretty important for a Christian. What’s it missing? Anyone guess?

Barbara Nielsen you can tell them because you are good at reminding me—

That’s right. Jesus isn’t on my list. I am missing the Other on the end of my life table that’s too heavy for me to lift! The help that truly constitutes what I need and desire to guide my daily my and my vocation.

How can we be grounded and whole without attending to our relationship with our creator?

But it’s not as simplistic as doing less or carving out a set time in the day for devotions or rearranging one’s priorities—as helpful as these things may be— Because at heart it’s not an either or between being distracted by Martha type busyness or sitting at Jesus feet and drinking in God’s Word for my life as Mary does. Both Mary and Martha were faithful disciples.

³ Guardian Commentary. Gil Bailes commentary on Luke 10:38-42.

Its not about either or—its more about balance---its about having both but having them in perspective in such a way that they inform each other. Because we aren't whole without both.

So then, the heart of our Mary Martha struggle is about the Mary part informing the Martha part. And the Martha part leading us back into seeking ever deeper and refreshing levels of the Mary part. Listen:

Preacher Thomas Long shares, “Years ago I served as part of an advisory group to the chaplains at a major university. Our job was to meet, to listen to reports from the chaplains about their work, and to offer support and counsel.

One year, we had heard the reports of the chaplains, and we were asking them questions. An older member of the council asked the chaplains, “What are the university students like morally these days?” The chaplains looked at each other, wondering how to answer that question.

Finally one of them took a stab at it. “Well,” she said, “I think you'd be basically pleased. The students are pretty ambitious in terms of their careers, but that's not all they are. A lot of them tutor kids after school. Some work in a night shelter and in a soup kitchen for the homeless. Last week a group of students protested apartheid in South Africa.....”

As she talked, the Jewish chaplain who was listening to her began to grin. The more she talked, the bigger he grinned, until finally it became distracting. “Am I saying something funny?” she said to the Jewish chaplain.

“No, no, I'm sorry,” he replied. “I was just sitting here thinking. You are saying that the university students are good people, and you're right. And you're saying that they are involved in good social causes, and they are.

But what I was thinking is that the one thing they lack is *a vision of salvation.*”

We all looked at the Jewish university chaplain. “No, it's true,” he said.

“If you do not have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can't get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down.”⁴

It finally beats you down.

We United Methodist Christians need to recover this truth: the work of serving without God's vision of salvation is vacant. As a consequence it empties us. Drains us and enslaves us to dull duty rather than joyful and energizing service.

The Mary Martha struggle for we disciples is embodied in the two stories Jesus told illustrating the great commandment and the Golden rule.

“The story of the Good Samaritan is about having the freedom to serve our neighbor as Jesus did.

The Mary and Martha story tells us that freedom is made possible only when we **love God with all our heart, mind and strength.**

My role as your pastoral leader is to reflect back to you the vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation—the vision of salvation God brings us through Jesus.

And it is our communal role to live it—

Together, let us be about cultivating the practice of the presence of God in intentional ways—in setting time aside for delving into scripture, Christian conferencing and prayer as well as in the now of every moment of caring service.

This is what the journey of discipleship is all about. Indeed, the journey is our home. Let the people say AMEN.

⁴ Thomas Long, Presbyterian pastor's sermon on “Mary and Martha” prepared for preaching July 22, 2007