

Who feels some sympathy for Martha in this story?

After all, she's doing what's clearly expected. We hear in our first lesson of the importance of hospitality in the culture of Abraham's time as he runs from place to place—from the tent entrance to greet the visitors, to Sarah to get the cakes started, to the herd to pick up a calf and back to his visitors. They eat while he catches his breath. And those values would not have changed significantly by Jesus' time.

I remember the one and only time a pastor came to our home. Let me tell you, there was a whirlwind of cleaning and a newly-made, still-hot-from-the-oven, rhubarb pie waiting for him when he arrived, of course with the option of vanilla ice cream to go on top. Not that I am implying that is an expectation of a pastoral visit...

And this wasn't just any everyday, ordinary visitor, and this wasn't even one of the seventy we recently heard commissioned to go and tell of Jesus. This was Jesus himself! Maybe a family friend if we put Luke's story together with John's. But at the very least, a man whose reputation as teacher and healer would have preceded him.

So Martha gets about it in the kitchen, and likely Mr. Martha is attending to the lawn and making a quick run about with the vacuum cleaner. At least that's how it divides out in our household—you know—jobs that require electricity and small motors versus those that don't...

She's hustling and bustling, managing the complexity of tasks that end up with all the parts of the meal ready at the same time. And I imagine that slowly but surely the resentment is building. While she is working away, as was expected in the culture and as was expected of

women, her sister is in there with the men, sitting and listening to Jesus—sitting at his feet, of all things.

At first it's only the occasional thought about Mary, and besides which, surely she will be in here to help soon. Surely, when she hears the noise of the meal being ground, she'll come in. Surely she couldn't be planning on staying out there.... Then you can imagine her thoughts turning in the way that they do for us in those situations... "I can't believe Jesus is putting up with this." "I bet he's going to say something soon." "He has to say something..." "When's he going to say something...?"

And then you know how it goes, her anger just boils over and she finds herself acting in a way—that if she thought about it—would probably give her pause. But before she knows it she's marched right into the middle of Jesus' teaching, interrupting, with her voice shaking because she's gotten so darn mad...

She doesn't just slip in and quietly ask Mary to come help. She doesn't just try to catch her eye, or give her the "look" that has developed between them as sisters.

She ends up making a scene, saying to Jesus, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself?"

She's so sure she is right and Mary is wrong that she is fully ready to enlist Jesus and all those listening on her behalf.

But Jesus doesn't react in the way that Martha expects. Not even close. Instead of getting chastised and sent into the kitchen, Mary is praised for her choice. "She has chosen the better part..."

So is Jesus placing a higher value on those who sit and listen over those who work, those who study scripture and spend time in prayer over those who slice pies in the kitchen and do the

three hours of back-and-forth required to mow the lawn? Is Jesus saying it's better to be a listener than a do-er? 'Cause at first glance, that's sure how it sounds.

And how does that connect with last week's lesson—the story of the good Samaritan? That reading was filled with “doing” language. The lawyer had asked, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life.” And at the end, Jesus says, “Go and *do* likewise.”

Are those of us who are busy doing the work of the church second class citizens to those who express their faith in more contemplative ways?

Well, let's look at this story a little more carefully, because there are details here that I think open the story up for us.

First we hear from the narrator that Martha was “distracted by her many tasks.” A good question would be to ask, “distracted from what?” The definition in my Greek lexicon is “To have one's attention directed from *one thing* to another.”

And it's in the midst of her distraction that she brings her complaint to Jesus. As we attend to Jesus' response, notice that he's not criticizing her for her activities. He doesn't say, “Mary, Mary, you're busy in the kitchen when you should be taking time to sit and listen. Instead, he's calling her to account for her *feelings*. “Mary, Mary, you're worried and distracted about many things.”

Then he says what I believe to be the key line in this story, “There is need of only one thing.”

One thing.

There's a scene in the movie *City Slickers* which gets at—in it's own way—this idea of “one thing.” And if we already had our projector screen installed, I still couldn't show it to you without some very careful editing of the sound track. But I'll relate the story for you with a helpful word substitution.

Curly, played by Jack Palance is riding along with Mitch, played by Billy Crystal. Curly is the classic image of a tough cowboy, with the squinty eyes, black cowboy hat, red bandana and cigarette clenched in the corner of his mouth. Mitch is a guy who's come out west looking for something and he's not sure what.

Curly says to Mitch, "You know what the secret of life is?" And Mitch says, "No, what?" "This." [holding up one finger] "Your finger?" "Curly says, "One thing, Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don't mean nothing." Mitch, puzzled, says, "That's great, but what's the one thing?" Curly says, "That's what you got to figure out."

That's the heart of what Jesus is saying. One thing only is needed.

I believe Jesus is saying, "There's not one form of devotion, but there should only be one object of devotion."

Martha's complaint in verse 40 is filled with "mes" and "mys." "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" Her concern is for herself and her situation. Mary's not behaving according to the standard of the day, but she is and she wants appropriate credit and notice for it. She wants the appropriate number of chits tallied up on her side of the balance sheet. She's done her duty, but it doesn't matter much if nobody notices.

She's not working hard in the kitchen for Jesus, she's working hard for herself.

She's not loving Jesus, she's loving being right, she's loving others thinking well of her, she's loving accumulating obligations.

And none of that's making her happy. None of it is bringing her joy. None of it is opening her to an awareness of God's great and unfathomable love for her, which at that moment is sitting in the living room teaching those gathered to listen.

We can have a lot of motivations for the things that we do, whether it's volunteer activities, our jobs, family time or even the way we fill up our free time . Sometimes we're

motivated by a sense of call, a sense that God is beckoning us into that place or activity. But it seems like more often our motivation is something else all together. Maybe we do the things we do out of a sense of duty, or obligation. Maybe because it seems to be our “turn.” Maybe we fill our hours with volunteer activities because we sense that it will look good on some balance sheet or other, whether that’s our family or our faith community, our neighbors or even some kind of heavenly tally sheet. Maybe we do what we do because we can’t see any good alternative.

Last week I talked about the motivations of the priest and the Levite who passed on the opposite side of the road to avoid the man in the ditch. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his last speech in Memphis, suggested that maybe they were afraid, and maybe they thought to themselves, “If I stop and help, what will happen to me.” And I said last week, that’s not a bad motivation. We do need to look out for ourselves and not put ourselves in places of danger or risk. But it is a me-centered motivation and it’s not, perhaps, the best motivation.

And King suggested that the Samaritan, instead of thinking of himself, thought, “If I don’t stop and help, what will happen to him.” That’s a way of thinking that takes us outside of ourselves, our cares and our worries. It’s an other-directed motivation, and that’s a better motivation.

But last week I suggested that we see ourselves as the man in the ditch, remembering that without Jesus, we have nothing. Without Jesus, we’re bound by our own brokenness, and the brokenness of the world. Without Jesus, we’re short on hope, we’re living shy of God’s promise and we’re blind to a love that not only surrounds us, lifts us up and lights are way through the darkest of days, but that also gives us the strength to love others and to love ourselves with just a fraction of the unbounded, unlimited love we ourselves have received.

So the best way is to ask ourselves, “How can I make Jesus the object of whatever it is that I am doing?” Whether it’s working in the church kitchen, mowing the lawn, struggling

through another work meeting or working hard in the sun for a paycheck. Or whether it's spending time studying scripture, or listening to God's word—however and wherever it meets us. Because we all of us need both the doing and the listening—one feeds the other.

How can we say to ourselves, “I want to put aside my resentment, my anger, my sense of duty or my sense of obligation, and do this one thing because I love Jesus and because Jesus loves me.” Doesn't that sound good? Doesn't that sound like the best motivation?

Julian of Norwich said, “The greatest honor we can give to God is to live gladly because of his love.”

Choosing Jesus. That's choosing the better part and it can't be taken away from us, because we were chosen first.

Someone recently shared with me the 3rd step prayer from Alcoholics Anonymous. It's a powerful prayer, and if we started our day with it, or started any activity with it, would help us turn our minds toward that better part—that one thing.

God, I offer myself to you-
to build with me
and to do with me as you will.
Relieve me of the burden of self,
that I may better do your will.
Take away my difficulties,
that victory over them may bear witness
to those I would help of your power,
your love, and your way of life.
May I do your will always!