

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

July 21, 2019

Title: Loving by Listening

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

Feeling pressured. Scattered. Pulled asunder. How will I ever get everything done? Do you ever feel that way? I do. I feel that way more often than I would like and sadly, more often than I should. At least for me, this has almost nothing to do with the many things on the “to do” list but rather it is much more connected to my attitude and to the health of my spiritual life.

For much of my life I have thought of myself as a Martha and I have often envied those who are more like Mary in today’s gospel. But if truth be told, there have also been times when like Martha, I have been frustrated with Mary and wanted more help with the many things that I thought needed, or should, be done. When I feel like that, I am always grateful when God catches my attention and reminds me that I have choices to make and sometimes I’m not making the best choices.

The story of Martha and Mary has often been used to pit one sister against the other. Too often sermons and commentators and others give all the Mary’s a pat on the back and tend to make the Martha’s feel somehow less acceptable. But I think that approach is a serious misreading of the story and even more a misunderstanding of Jesus’ response to the situation.

If we think only about the obvious attributes seen in this story – the outward actions – then we fail to allow these two women to be full humans who were equally loved and valued by Jesus. And they are not just

characters in a parable. but they were real living breathing human beings who were close friends of Jesus.

A better way, I think, is to recognize that we are not **either** Martha or Mary, but rather that we are **both** Martha and Mary. Likely, the attributes of one are generally stronger than the other. I think it is important for us to pay attention to finding ways to develop both parts of ourselves so that we are fully developed humans and not simply caricatures.

In that culture, women were almost always identified by their relationship with a male, but In Luke's gospel Martha and Mary are not identified here as sister of Lazarus. Rather, Luke says that Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. "Only under certain circumstances were women legally allowed to own property, and very few women met the criteria."ⁱ For Luke to provide this detail he must be telling us something important about Mary and Martha.

Despite the assumptions of many commentators that Martha is busy preparing an elaborate dinner for Jesus, one of the author's I read this week points out that there is actually no reference at all to an elaborate meal being prepared or served. In fact, Luke uses a very technical term to describe Martha's work "diakonian". The NRSV, which we use, translates this word as "many tasks" but it might better be translated "by much serving".

The Greek word actually "denotes participation with others in leadership and ministry on behalf of the community. Six of its eight uses in Acts point to leadership in the church and proclamation of the Gospel. ... It may well be that Martha is distracted by 'much ministry'" "Martha's many distracting tasks may not have been the dinner table, but rather, the overwhelming work of ministry."ⁱⁱ

She was probably busy trying to do some very important work, but whatever it was, it was distracting her but something that right now was more important. It was distracting her from paying attention to Jesus – and it was likely because of him that she was doing this work in the first place.

On Friday morning, as I was thinking about writing this sermon and about the many other things I thought I needed to do, God tapped me on the shoulder and reminded me of something even more important. For the last two weeks I had been taking my granddaughter to theater camp and that meant leaving my house earlier than I usually do. Rather than getting up earlier, I had allowed my morning time with God to get pushed aside. On Friday I was feeling pressured, scattered and pulled asunder.

Instead of jumping into the many things I needed to do, I went outside to sit and spend some quiet time alone with God. I should not be surprised but God used this time to remind me, yet again, that my to-do list is never more important than time with God and that my to-do list is much more manageable when I first spend time with God.

The Upper Room Disciplines reading for today says that Saint Francis de Sales reportedly once said, “Every one of us needs half an hour of prayer each day except when we are busy, then we need an hour.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As Disciples of Jesus Christ, whatever work we are trying to do is a form of ministry and for us to be best able to do that, we need to first “Turn our eyes upon Jesus” as the song says. In doing this we are better able to see what is most important.

Part of my morning devotional time currently includes reading a short section from a book called “CPR for the Soul, Reviving a sense of the Sacred in Everyday Life” by Tom Stella. On Friday morning, while God was getting my attention, I read a section titled “Contemporary Violence”. It

began with a quote from Douglas Steele that said, “There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist ... most easily succumbs: activism and overwork... The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence.”^{iv}

In response, Stella wrote, “To think of ‘the rush and pressure of modern life’ as forms of violence may seem like a stretch. After all, aren’t concerns, demands, and projects aspects of a normal existence, part of the territory that comes with having a job and being in relationships? And aren’t we supposed to help others as much as we can? Why would any of these be considered violent? St. Ignatius of Loyola, ... had insight into this quandary when he coined the phrase ‘temptation under the guise of good.’ Too much of a good thing might just be a bad thing.”

He continues, “Contemporary violence is less about *what* we do than *how much* we do. This form of violence isn’t about our actions, but about the effect our actions have on us.”^v

This is what was happening to Martha in today’s reading. Her actions, as good as they likely were, were having an undesirable effect on her. She was upset with her sister. She even drew their guest, Jesus, into her unrest by putting him on the spot and asking her to intervene.

Martha was feeling “pulled asunder”. She had lost herself and her perspective in all that she was trying to do. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being busy. But as Stella pointed out, “If I approach a task, whether at home or in the workplace” (and we might add church) “as something to get done instead of something to do” we are likely to

resemble Martha. “When I’m in a ‘get it done’ mode there is no joy in the doing. Whatever the job, it becomes a chore, just something to finish. This attitude makes the work at hand seem to take longer and feel harder than it has to be. Even minor interruptions are an annoyance, and small mishaps create frustration. But when I enter into my work as something to do it becomes an experience that holds the possibility of being engaging and interesting, or at least not so draining.”^{vi}

These were the things I was reading on Friday morning. These were the things God was using to get my attention, and perhaps more importantly to remind me that when I turn first to God then whatever I am trying to do, or thinking I need to do, becomes a partnership with God rather than something that I think I have to do on my own.

I suspect that Mary was a partner with Martha in the ministry that they were doing. If this were something that Martha normally did on her own, it is unlikely that she would have been upset with Mary not helping her. So the norm was probably that they did this work together. It seems that in this instance though, Mary was remembering that in order to be able to focus on the work they were trying to do, it was important to first focus on the reason they were doing this work; it was important to focus first on Jesus.

In this passage, Jesus isn’t telling Martha to stop working and I don’t believe he is telling us that either. Rather, I think he is telling us not to let ourselves become overwhelmed and instead to focus on what matters most. Whatever it is we are trying to do, whether we think about it as ministry or a long to-do list, we have to listen first to Jesus. When we do that, we may then discover that our to-do list is not separate from our faith, but one of the many ways that we are faithfully following Jesus.

Faithfully following Jesus includes our relationships with our family, our friends, our co-workers, the people we meet in a store, the other drivers on the road, anyone with whom we have either direct or indirect contact. Faithfully following Jesus includes **all** of our interactions. It includes all those things on our to-do list. Any and all of them can, and should, be a form of ministry. Any and all of them have possibilities to them if we think of them as what we are doing rather than something to accomplish and check off our list. They are experiences that are part of our lives and they can have a great deal more meaning when we give them first to God.

When my inner Martha becomes more pronounced than my inner Mary, I am grateful that Jesus comes and reminds me to sit at his feet. I am grateful for days like Friday that get my attention and put me back on track and I always hope that I will stay on track. However, after all these years, I know that I need to pay attention and that I will allow other things to get in the way. When that happens I know that Jesus will once again lovingly say to me, as he did to Martha, “Beverly, Beverly, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.”

I pray that you and I will hear Jesus’ voice when he lovingly speaks to each of us to remind us either that there **is** work to be done, or that it is time to stop and sit for awhile so that we may see all that we do as a partnership with God.

“When we make time to sit at the feet of Jesus, even for just a moment, our souls are refreshed. We can then tend to our tasks full of assurance and trust, rather than full of worry and distraction.”^{vii} As today’s meditation in the Upper Room Disciplines points out, “Prayer is food for our spirits, thirst-quenching water for our souls, and the fresh air we need for our spiritual survival. Prayer grounds our lives in the word of God, in our

relationship with God, and in our awareness of the presence of Christ in each person we meet.”^{viii}

ⁱ www.gbod.org/worship worship planning notes for “Living as Disciples Worship Planning Series Season After Pentecost 2019, Year C” Preaching notes for July 21, 2019. (I am unable to find the name of the person writing this material).

ⁱⁱ Ibid. Note that the author here quotes and relies upon work by Bonnie Thurston (*Women in the New Testament: Questions and Community*. Eugene Wipf & Stock, 1998)

ⁱⁱⁱ Upper Room Disciplines 2019, p.243

^{iv} Stella, Tom CPR for the Soul, p. 66 quoting Douglas Steel, in Thomas Merton *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

^v Ibid

^{vi} Ibid, p. 69

^{vii} Upper Room Disciplines 2019 for 7/19/19 p.241

^{viii} Ibid, 7/21/19, p.243