

Distracted
First Reading - Psalm 119:103-105
Second Reading - Luke 10:38-42

I happen to populate one of those atypical vocations where my spouse is present to observe the product of my work. Imagine an accountant signing her name on the last page of the tax return, as her spouse observes — *I thought the flourish of the R in your signature was a bit over the top*; or perhaps the plumber hears the voice of his spouse behind him — *No one unclogs a line like you do, dear*. That could quickly become unsettling.

However, for me, I find immense comfort and strength in Donna's presence in worship. It is a privilege to have my consigliere, my counsel, my best friend with me in worship. For preachers and educators and church musicians, every Sunday is bring your family to work day. I rely on their feedback, their support of what I do.

That said, it has been pointed out to me that there are occasions outside of church, when I am purportedly very difficult to watch or observe, particularly when I am washing dishes, making the bed, packing for a trip, or flailing at some other household task. Apparently ... without my knowing it, I was raised as a feral cat, with no idea what one does inside a house,

because my methodologies and my protocols and my pacing are ... lacking? Unrefined? Ill-conceived? It's not that I do a lazy, haphazard job, rather it would appear that I may study on the task a bit too long, that my motor skills are moderately clumsy, that perhaps I may on occasion become distracted by what is playing on the television, thus extending the time it takes to complete the task before me. To be honest, if sworn affidavits were required, I know three people who share my last name who would testify that after 36+ years of training, my skills haven't actually improved at all.

Now, in my defense, I have to report that in middle school I could shoot a basketball, catch a football, and run really fast without tripping over my toes, but when the school gave those tests designed to highlight your potential abilities for various vocations, in the exercise that measured the manual dexterity of my fingers, I ranked in the bottom 2% of the nation. So, I've always had that going for me. To this day, my boys make fun of the way I tie my shoes. I can't figure it out. Things just seem to go awry as soon as I get to the bunny ears.

So humility comes pretty easily to me. When it comes to organization, task management, planning, execution, production, presentation, I married

a hall-of-famer and I labor in a church full of hall-of-famers. It is practically a denominational motto — Decently and in order — "omnia autem honeste et secundum ordinem fiant" — "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way". I marvel at the efficiency, organization, and thoroughness of so many people around me. Donna's comparing rates on travel insurance before I can even commit to memory when and where we are going. Mary Katheryne and Adrienne would have a bulletin to print before I've opened the Bible to see what I'm preaching on. Zach's picking out Christmas music in July ... for 2027.

Emily and Marge are prepared for a reception before the person even dies. Colin has acquired a repair schedule for our campus for the next ten to twenty years. Rebecca, Lindsey, and Melissa are always more prepared than the people who wrote the materials they teach. Cheryl is a communications savant. Tammy, Greg, Rich, Leisa always bring genius and thoughtful leadership to the table. Terry's written a note before she even receives the gift. Before I can point out a needed repair, Steve's already made the call, or climbed up to fix it himself. Patty is always here before me on Sunday morning. I could go on and on about the saints of organization and

programming that surround me. It's very humbling. I just pray they never observe me trying to tie my shoelaces.

That's why we know Martha must have been a Presbyterian - sending out invitations, repairing the dining room chairs, examining the corners for cobwebs before the spiders are even born, roasting the lamb, filleting the fish, setting the table, polishing the silver, mixing the salad, brewing the tea, arranging flowers, baking the bread, caramelizing the creme brûlée, picking the blueberries, cutting the pineapple.

Jesus ... God is coming to dinner! It was stressful enough when Lazarus' boss came for dinner, but Jesus? God? This is on a whole different level! What do you cook for the Lord Incarnate? What if the Savior is gluten free? You know Martha is stressed. She has lists for her lists. Probably needs an index to categorize her lists.

Have you ever tried to walk through a church kitchen on the night of a big church event? It's like trying to cross the traffic circle at the Arc de Triomphe. You'd be lucky to make it out of there alive. People flying in all directions without any lane lines, everyone hustling to perform their list of tasks in the hope of a perfect event.

Jesus is coming to dinner! Can you imagine the stress, the nerves, the pressure to get it right? Fans of *The Bear*, the hyper intense portrayal of a restaurant in pursuit of a Michelin star can sense it. At *The Bear*, watching the chaos in the kitchen is like watching a heart attack from the inside. It's like cramming a small space with a bunch of hyperventilating insomniacs, everyone one of them in the middle of a nervous breakdown. Jesus is coming to dinner, and the sauce isn't thickening! Another batch in the garbage disposal, another trip to the store, another item on the list.

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things...” Ya think? Well Jesus, why wouldn't she be? It is You, after all. What would you expect? *“Hey Jesus, come on in a sit a spell. Don't mind the mess. Just grab yourself a beer from the fridge, clear the junk off that chair and take a load of your feet. We can order Domino's once Jeopardy's over.* No, this is the Word made flesh. Martha's first thought after she heard herself say — *Why don't you come for dinner on Thursday?* — was probably — *What was I thinking?*

We have to remember that when reading scripture, these are regular people with regular people anxieties, emotions, flaws, and personalities. Think about it, your guest may compliment you for seeming to pull

everything together so effortlessly, and you'll smile politely, but you know the truth. You worked your fingers to the bone, and fretted off ten pounds worth of worry to pull it all together.

I think you know something about the sweat, stress, frenzy, and work that precedes your walk to answer the doorbell, pulling your last minute self together — *Welcome, come into the house. We are so glad you are here.* Somehow you stifle the snorting laugh when the guest says, *I hope you didn't go to any trouble.*

“A woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord'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; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’”

Now, we have to be careful with this story, because we come to it with all these layers of interpretation that have been attached to it over the years. Both Martha and Mary have carried the burden of being stereotyped,

caricatured, and used to unfairly characterize others. We reduce people to a cliché using Mary or Martha as a monolithic archetype. You may have been asked the question — Are you a Martha or a Mary? There is even a popular book many of you have read, titled, *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*.

Mary has been pigeonholed as everything from contemplative, studious, and fully present to lazy, inconsiderate, and irresponsible. Martha has been pigeonholed as everything from diligent, task oriented, an attentive host to obsessive compulsive, superficial, a harpy martyr. However, the truth is that neither Mary, Martha, nor anyone else can be so easily confined in character. Each person is typically much more complex than the label given to them. Mary cannot be dismissed as flighty and Martha cannot be reduced to being driven. Both offer important clues to discipleship and service.

What would you do if Jesus came to visit? Would you, like the little drummer boy do your *best for him ... pa, rum, pum, pum, pum*, hoping to be the model host, the exemplar of hospitality? Life doesn't just happen. You know the cliché - Proper preparation and planning prevent poor performance. Discipleship involves effort, thought, organization. Have you

ever attended an event where the caterer backed out at the last moment?

Did you notice how quickly a hungry crowd becomes an angry crowd. There is always work to be done, plans to be made, life to be organized.

Remember, Jesus said, *The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.*

therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Without the effort, everyone goes hungry. Discipleship is service, is effort, is organization and planning. If Jesus is invited for dinner, he's not expecting to go home hungry. If Jesus is coming to dinner what would you hope for him to experience?

However, as Martha wipes the sweat off her brow, Mary, Luke says, *sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.* And when Martha complains about being stuck with a spatula and a meat thermometer, Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better part. We don't hear Martha respond, but I'm thinking, Jesus, that chicken is not going to broast itself!

You know what I mean. This is the season of big family beach trips, and don't you know there is some fussing going on, as adult siblings fight over who is not contributing to the effort to clean up after the shrimp boil. You better get yourself up offa that couch and start scrubbing that pot!

Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. The better part? What's going on here?

You see, this is where the popular characterization of Mary and Martha breaks down. This isn't about the responsible child and the lazy child. Nor is this about the busy martyr and the contemplative spirit. This is about the two sides of discipleship: Listening, learning, understanding — Serving, engaging, doing. It is no accident that the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha are side by side. The punchline of each must always be held in tension in the life of the disciple.

The punchline for the Good Samaritan — Don't just walk by with your head in the clouds, **do** something. The punchline for Mary and Martha — Don't just do something, sit down and **listen** to understand why. When Jesus says Mary is doing the better part, he is not minimizing the value of work in serving Jesus, he is focusing on what informs the work and gives it purpose, direction, meaning, transforming our inclination to busyness into faithful discipleship.

Task oriented, we can work through a list. We give you a list and you immediately start checking items off of it. But do you know why you are

doing it? Have you experienced how Jesus brings together purpose and gifts to form a way of life? Have you soaked in the stories of how Jesus transformed a ragtag group of misunderstood and misunderstanding disciples into a body of believers who have taken the good news of redemption and the love of Christ to the ends of the earth? Have you assimilated the narrative revealing the thread of God's ongoing work of grace across the Old and New Testaments?

Every month, we are saying here at the table, Jesus is coming to dinner, let us listen to him. Don't be so busy that you miss the opportunity to hear what Jesus has to say, to be fully present before the Word.

This week some friends were telling me about a time many years ago, when they didn't have two dimes to rub together, but the Eagles were coming on tour to give a concert in a city nearby, and they were determined not to miss it, so some how, some way, they pulled together \$90 (a fortune back then) and they made their pilgrimage to that concert so that they could be fully present and soak in every verse of every song. They were not going to miss it. It was a once in a lifetime experience that they have carried with them for a lifetime.

Don't be fooled, Mary probably did more than her share of work for Jesus' kingdom, but that work would have meaning, because she first listened and was fully present to Jesus when he came to dinner. Life is brief, so you don't want to miss its meaning, its purpose, its source. Jesus is coming to dinner and Mary didn't want to miss a word of what he would say. What about you? Amen.