

Sermon on 8 Pentecost C: Luke 10:38-42

Preached on Sunday, July 22 @ Custer Lutheran Fellowship by Pastor David Van Kley

### **Making Room for Mary**

Today's gospel seems **so** unfair. I mean, Martha is working so hard to make Jesus feel at home, but Mary just sits there, like a bump on a log. Martha cooks supper. Martha sweeps the floor. Martha sets the table. Mary just sits there. You can't really blame Martha, can you, for being irritated? **Shouldn't** Mary have helped her? Why does **Martha** catch it from Jesus? Doesn't the wrong person get yelled at in this text?

All in all, Martha seems to provide a good example of Christian hospitality. She works behind the scenes to make another person welcome. She is a symbol for all who have clinked together pots and pans in church kitchens or prepared bars for funerals. She stands for all who have readied a bed in the spare room for company and taken them on the grand tour of the Black Hills! She stands for all those who are working in the summer heat to build the Habitat for Humanity house. Yet, Jesus rebukes Martha. It seems so unfair.

Though total opposites, sisters Martha and Mary have something in common. They **both** want to make Jesus feel welcome. They **both** love Jesus. It's just that they express their love in different ways: Martha bakes the bread; Mary sits and listens. Martha was busy **doing for Christ**; Mary was busy **being with Christ**. And when forced to choose, Jesus allowed that Mary's way was better, at least more important at that time.

Each of us has something of Martha and something of Mary within us. Within some of us, Martha is awfully strong! We must always be **doing** something. We find it hard to leave the office at 4 PM. We don't feel OK until all the items on the "to do" list are crossed out. We can't rest until the floor is mopped and the pillows are where they should be. Until the weed-whacking is done and the flowers are watered. Even our time off is filled with activity. When someone asks us how the summer is going, we say, "It's so busy!" To which they will respond: "Well, it keeps you out of trouble anyway!"

That's the way we think, that **doing** things is all important. It often gets us into trouble. Because the more we do, it seems, the more doing there is to do—if you know what I mean! Pretty soon, we begin to feel trapped by all this doing. We start to feel sorry for ourselves and blame others for our being too busy! "If only she carried her weight! If only he did his share!" Or as the leaders of the women's group in my last church used to say: Where are the **young** women? Why must it **always** be us?"

Perhaps we could call this "the Martha syndrome," the primary symptoms of which are exhaustion, burn out, and self-pity. It's a disease that is chronic, progressive, highly contagious. And it sucks the joy out of life.

Now I think it's possible to have the opposite problem: sitting around all day doing nothing. My mother would tell you that I was like that as a kid. I've sometimes

thought, what would Jesus have said if **Mary** had been the one to complain about **Martha**. “Look at her! Always running around doing stuff like a chicken with her head cut off. Make her sit down.” Then maybe Jesus would have rebuked **Mary**: “Leave your sister alone. She’s doing good work. You should try it sometime!”

But that isn’t what happened and that isn’t the point.

The part of Mary highlighted in this text is the part of us that seeks time for play and relaxation and solitude, time for family and friends, time to sit on a granite overlook and listen to the birds or sit in a church pew and turn off all the distractions in order to soak up God’s gifts. Mary’s voice is often the voice of reason within us.

Which is why a loving Jesus says: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need for only one thing! Mary has chosen the better part.” What Jesus is saying to us is simply: “Give Mary her due. Leave room for Mary. Rest is as important as work. Listening is as important as talking. Worship is as important as serving.”

Before I went to seminary, I attended a church with two wonderful pastors. Just after our first associate pastor came, straight out of seminary, the senior pastor decided to go on vacation! Pastor Jim asked Pastor Rudy, “What shall I do while you’re away? I don’t even know where to start.” Rudy said, “Prepare your sermon, visit the hospital, and then go out into the woods and pick blueberries.” Of all the things to say! Rudy, for being an incredibly hard worker, also had a lot of Mary in him. He knew how to be a little lazy. “Just go out and pick blueberries,” he said.

It’s hard for many of us to hear words like that. We think the world will fall apart if we’re not accomplishing something. We act as if there were no God but ourselves.

God sometimes has gone to great lengths to make this point to me. Once, I was on a youth trip in Michigan’s canoe country wilderness. Late in the trip, a boy named Scot Lang and I went all the way back to the park entrance to fill up huge water sacs with fresh drinking water. We were portaging from lake to lake back to our campsite when we heard the rumble of thunder. We thought little of it at first, but as the thunder grew louder, we realized that we might not make it. On the far side of West Bear Lake, just across the water from our campsite, the storm hit. Driving rain turned the surface of the lake into a blur of dancing water. Lightning scissored the sky, accompanied by earsplitting peals of thunder. A tree crashed to the ground very close to us. For over an hour, we huddled under the hemlocks, water pouring down our faces, soaking our clothes. Tough little Scottie began to cry. I feared the worst. Like Martin Luther, I bargained with God, began to promise God that I would act differently if I survived this ordeal!

That’s when God broke through, saying, in effect: “I don’t want your promises. You’ve made enough promises to me: confirmation, marriage, ordination, your kids’

baptisms. **I** want to make promises to **you**. Nothing will separate us, neither lightning nor cold, neither life nor death. I am with you always, to the close of the age.” An eerie sense of peace dawned on me, there in the pelting rain. The Martha inside me stopped worrying long enough for the Mary inside me to listen. God broke through.

Now, I think it wouldn't hurt for all of us to go out into the wilderness from time to time, just to listen. But wherever we are, if we open our ears to, God will find a way to speak to us. When you switch off the TV, put your feet up and close your eyes. When you take the afternoon off to play with your kids on the beach. When you kneel down in your home to begin the day in prayer. The important thing is the attitude of rest and expectant listening. Mary's attitude.

Today, when our group that traveled to Nicaragua describes their experience, I'm sure that's what you'll hear. They didn't go to help with building churches or treat sick people—not that those things are bad! But they didn't go to **do** things; they went to sit and listen. To **be** with people. And that's when God broke through.

Now is Mary's **season**. It's hard to believe, but we're halfway through the summer. Have you taken time to be like Mary? Are you giving Mary her due?

In the end, the point is not that we should be **either** Martha **or** Mary. We are called to be both! But in some sense, we must be, like Mary, in order to do, like Martha. We must be hearers of the word in order to become doers of it. We must be Christ's, with the apostrophe s, so that we can be Christs, without the apostrophe!

Perhaps you heard this word of advice from your parents: “Don't just sit there; do something!” But maybe we've learned that lesson too well. In today's gospel, through Mary, Jesus speaks a subversive word to us: “Don't just do something; sit there!” Amen.