

**SECOND SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 10:38-42**

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 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.' 41 But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

*The word of God for the people of God.* **THANKS BE TO GOD**

**READING OF THE PSALM: Psalm 15 (responsive)**

*O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?*

**2 Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart;**

*3 who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends,*

*nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;*

**4 in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord;**

*who stand by their oath even to their hurt; 5 who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent.*

**Those who do these things shall never be moved.**

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### ***“Becoming Whole”***

I have heard, as I suspect many of you have, interpretations on this wonderful little story from the gospel of Luke, interpretations that are quick to ask us to identify whether we are either a Mary or a Martha. Rev. Phil Hooper calls these interpretations spiritual personality tests. These interpretations then conclude, with a pious and holy resolution, that we need have the right answer, that being a Mary is what we all must be, people that have that “better part”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we’d be better if we’d prioritize kneeling in prayer rather than mopping the church floor; we’d be better if we’d quietly contemplate our scriptures rather than prepare the meal for the church fellowship. Well, well, hmmm. Not so fast. Let’s look at this passage and see what the Spirit has for us today.

Jesus, and presumably his disciples, had entered the village where Mary and Martha lived and, while not named, their brother, Lazarus, too. Jesus was welcomed into their home, and after a time, likely quite some time, Martha, who has been accomplishing the work of hospitality... cleaning, straightening, cooking, and serving the guests, confronted Jesus with a complaint. She was frustrated, irritated, because her sister, Mary, had not been helping her, but had been sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening, taking in every word that he was saying. *“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”*

Now, I grew up, one of 4 daughters, in the sixties and early seventies in the Midwest. While my father was greatly more progressive than some, there was a still context in my home, in my place and time that the necessary work of service and hospitality, often called “women’s work”, was of less value than men’s. Some of my earliest memories involved women...my mother, sisters, grandmother flitting from place to place in the kitchen preparing fragrant dishes, setting the table, decorating it, and then later minding it, refilling a cup of coffee or water here, offering to get a second helping there, cleaning up a spill or replacing a dropped serving utensil. Following this, the women cleared and washed the dishes ...all while my father read the newspaper or he and other men guests, if any, talked, debated, and relaxed. It was what we’d all been raised to do, my grandmother’s and mother’s generations and the generations before them.

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Hooper. *“A Trick Question”*. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/a-trick-question-pentecost-6-c-july-17-2022/> (accessed 7-15-2022).

In my church it was no different. There, the women of the Ladies Circles simply did as did the women in my home. As a group, THEY flitted over the many stoves and counters, and the tables of the church's dining area. I felt very proud to be included in their number when given the job of "water glass filler". I was given a pewter pitcher filled with iced water and told to keep all the glasses at each table full. I and the others did their work of hospitality with pride and dignity. I clearly understood and did not question that the men of the church had the jobs of preaching, governing, studying Scriptures; they did the "spiritual" work. Again, it was quite simply as it had been for generations, and it was well, systemic. In fact, if a man ever wandered into the kitchen, they were usually shooed out, for fear they'd mess something up or just cause the division of labor to be embarrassingly upset.

It is because of this, my background, because of the norms that shaped me, that I now read this text, in our current day, with some frustration, and I am not able to accept the interpretations of it that are so often offered. I think how great it'd been, how much easier it'd been, if Jesus had gathered up all of his disciples and just said, "*Hey boys, let's all help in baking that bread and chopping those veggies, and then let's do the dishes so that Martha can join us in our discussions soon*". I share Rev. Debbie Thomas' sentiment as she wishes Jesus had declared that the necessary "*hospitality work isn't a prelude to the sacred. It IS the sacred.*"<sup>2</sup>

Admitting these frustrations, however, (and it feels good to do that), it is important to look at what Jesus really said. Sometimes our impressions (initial or long-held) can be really misguided. First, take a look....Jesus affirmed, he stood in strong solidarity, with Mary's right to discipleship, didn't he? This IS huge, because in Jesus' tradition, only male disciples sat at their teacher's feet to study.<sup>3</sup> I, as a female pastor, particularly should not take this lightly. None of us should. It is one of the most liberating and elevating passages for women there are. And, in addition, note that Jesus did not criticize Martha personally as bad. No, he didn't. He didn't call her out for her hospitality, either. Her cooking, cleaning and serving WAS not the problem. No, he seemed instead to be focused on something else. He said, "*You are worried and distracted by many*

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<sup>2</sup>Debbie Thomas. "Sermon for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Luke 10:38-42". <https://asermonforeversunday.com/> (accessed 7-14-22).

<sup>3</sup>Debbie Thomas.

*things...there is need of only one thing.”*

Understanding the terms, worried and distracted, is important here. In the Greek, the word for “worried” means to be filled with angst, to be strangled or seized by the throat. The word for “distracted” means to be separated, fragmented, torn apart. So, what Jesus was actually saying was this: “Martha, you needed to stop, take a breath, quit thinking of yourself and realize who is in your midst. You need to quit pursuing the endpoint that has seized her mind and instead be still enough, take the time enough, to nurture a relationship with me!”<sup>4</sup> Yes, Martha’s purposeful endpoint, the reason for all of her good, hard, and necessary work needed to be...him.<sup>5</sup> It was not to be found in her harried, frenzied, shallow world. Jesus had broken into her world and was changing it, life by life, bit by bit, through his way of love and peace. And she could be a part of this. He wanted her to be part of it.

As Rev. Debbie Thomas observes, *“As soon as Jesus entered Martha’s house, he turned the place upside down. He messed with her expectations, routines, and habits. He insisted on change, costly change. Perhaps she assumed that she could invite him into her life...and still carry on as usual, maintaining control, privileging her own priorities, and clinging to her much-beloved agendas and schedules. But no, Jesus required her wholehearted surrender. Every action, every decision, every priority, and every life choice would have to now be filtered through a new love, a new devotion, a new passion.”*<sup>6</sup>

Jesus, not Martha, would be providing the hospitality...for he was the bread of life, the living water. The wine was his own blood for anyone who spiritually, earnestly would receive it. Her life, and everything she did in it, whether it was clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, freeing the oppressed, speaking for the voiceless, or simply cooking the dinners, sweeping floors and doing the dishes for others, must now begin with only one thing... a devotion to HIM and his purposes in the world. As Phil Hooper says, “Even the small, daily things, held the possibility of divine inbreaking, if done in mindfulness of God’s ever-present love.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Teri McDowell Ott. “Looking into the Lectionary. 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost”. <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/07/sixth-sunday-after-pentecost-july-17-2022/>. (July 15, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Phil Hooper.

<sup>6</sup> Debbie Thomas.

<sup>7</sup> Phil Hooper.

AS Mike and I discussed this different perspective on the story this week, he recalled a Handel oratorio which speaks to the same message: It's lyrics:

*As with rosy steps the morn, Advancing, drives the shades of night,  
So from virtuous toils well-borne, Raise Thou our hopes of endless light.  
Triumphant saviour, Lord of day, Thou art the life, the light, the way!*<sup>8</sup>

This is what Jesus was inviting Martha to have...a chance for her toils to be well borne... to be well bourne in the life and light and way. He was inviting her to first then take the time to *fall wholly in love and to become lovingly whole*.

So, I think what the Spirit has for us today in this text, brothers and sisters, contrary to maybe what we've considered before, is to analyze the state of our minds and the state of our hearts. *(Pause)* Are we people who do what we do because we're driven by an anxious perfectionism, a need for recognition, or simply because we've not questioned the "system" that requires it of us? Or are we driven in whatever we do in service of Jesus, our Savior? Is our busyness getting the best of us such that we are quick to anger, seldom feeling engaged and fully alive, seldom able to enjoy deep relationships with others? Or do we have a peace that passes understanding because we know the Prince of peace is in our midst, that we belong to him and are doing his work? Do we have inner fragmentations, are we consumed by worries that prohibit us from fully loving anyone more than self? Or have we chosen the Christ who has loved us with complete abandon, who invites us to do the same for him and others?

Yes, I think this is what this little story is about...not about choosing between contemplation or action, worship or service, prayer or hospitality. All work done for the Lord is valued and worthy. It is not about being a Martha OR a Mary. It is about the orientation of our minds and hearts, surrendering the heavy burdens, whatever they are, the weights which are consuming us and tearing us apart and instead following the One who maps for us a peaceful, beautiful way, a way, the only way that cannot be taken from us. It is about falling in love and then letting that show in our lives. It is about becoming whole, lovingly whole. *(pause)* So, the choice is ours. Siblings in Christ, let's choose him. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://aseekingspirit.wordpress.com/2013/02/06/as-with-rosy-steps-the-morn/> (accessed 7-15-2022).