

“At Jesus’ Feet”

September 20, 2020

Sabbath: Holy Rest series – Livestream

I wonder if when reading this story from Luke’s Gospel, my sisters would think of us growing up together – the two of them working hard outside and me inside the house or being with my mom wherever she was. I wouldn’t blame them. I was the youngest and didn’t have the same responsibility to do farm chores like they did. I don’t know if they ever resented it, but maybe it says something about me that I think I might resent it if I was them!

Martha, for years, has received criticism when this passage is read. *Are you a Mary or a Martha? Be a Mary, not a Martha. Sit and listen to Jesus.* These two women have almost become caricatures – one is the doer and one is the watcher, one is working hard while the other listens. We’ve almost made it an “either/or” story, but it’s a “both/and.”

It’s okay to admit that we sympathize with Martha. But this isn’t simply about a woman getting upset at her sister. Martha is showing hospitality as was expected in Jesus’ time. Jesus defines greatness by talking about serving others. Martha is doing what’s expected.

It’s not the doing that’s the problem. We know that we need people like Martha to get things done. Any church or organization or business – any household - needs people who are action-oriented. We need people who will make the lists and take the lead. Jesus is clear that it’s not the work Martha is doing that’s an issue; it’s the worry and distraction from all that’s going on. It’s an attitude problem at the core.

If hospitality is Martha’s goal, and that was an important social expectation, then she’s moved from being hospitable to being frustrated and resentful. I imagine her in the kitchen getting louder and louder and more ticked off by the minute as Mary sits with Jesus in the other room. Perhaps she’s thinking... **SHOW SLIDE** – *This house was clean yesterday. We’re sorry you missed it.*

Martha is pulled (even dragged) in different directions. Perhaps we can relate to that! Worry doesn’t do us much good, but we sure spend a lot of time on it. Even when I want to be hospitable, it’s hard not to get worried about making sure that everything is just as it should be. And after all, if Jesus was coming to your house, wouldn’t you be a little distracted? We’d want it to be just right. We’d want to leave a good impression. I shared last week how I felt crushed when a pastoral counselor told me that we really can’t multi-task. Perhaps we’ve felt like this before... **SHOW SLIDE** – *My brain has too many tabs open.*

Martha can't pay attention to her guest if she's worried and distracted. She forgets about wanting to be hospitable. She can't be present with Jesus, and as much as she wants to give him her best as a good host, he wants to give her everything. Martha's resentment turns to irritability - she tries to throw Mary under the bus! It's classic triangulation! Martha goes to Jesus to try to get Mary in trouble!

And what's worse – Martha doesn't get the reply she expected. *Don't you care, Jesus? Aren't you on my side?* And Jesus' reply clearly shows that he doesn't feel the same way – at least not where she's coming from. Hospitality is a gift that we offer to others, and sometimes hospitality means listening to the person in front of us. It means offering our attention – our full attention.

So I sympathize with Martha, especially because I know I'd feel that way. And if my sisters did, I get it. We can get so distracted that we lose the joy in serving; whatever it is we're doing becomes a chore rather than a way we love and serve God and others. James Wallace writes, "Hospitality isn't primarily about the food; more important is the focus." It's not about what we can do, but why we do it.

But I also hear the challenge to all of us – to slow down and understand the gift of time that we can offer to Jesus. We can so easily get caught up in work – with no end or beginning – just working and going without time to find some rest in Jesus. Mary never says anything, so I wonder if we're missing some dialogue here. I wonder if Martha tried to get her attention – some clearing the throats or clanging some dishes together.

But here's the interesting and surprising part. Mary is a disciple of Jesus - sitting at his feet and listening to him. He is her rabbi - her teacher. So we see Jesus doing what he does so often - breaking down barriers. Women wouldn't have been the ones to sit at a rabbi's feet - to listen and learn. But notice that Jesus says that Mary has chosen the good part - she's welcome in Jesus' circle. Mary is affirmed as she engages her mind and heart in Jesus' presence.

This isn't simply about doing something or not doing something; this is about being in Jesus' presence. This is about spending time with him, not just doing something for him, though they are connected. From a faith perspective, we have to be disciples to make disciples. We have to give Jesus time – even quieting ourselves enough to listen to him – so that we can do what he calls us to do.

There's freedom in his invitation to Martha, too. It's not a critique as much as an invitation. Martha's servant heart is a gift, but she's not limited by it or limited to it. That alone is a powerful part of this story. We don't have to reject Martha to appreciate Mary. Maybe we need to look in the Gospel itself.

Right before this story, Luke's Gospel has Jesus telling the parable of the Good Samaritan - where Jesus defines a neighbor as a person in need and uses a Samaritan as

the ultimate helper and model for loving neighbor. And Jesus, so often, turns expectations upside-down! How could a Samaritan be the one to show how you love your neighbor? It was unthinkable!

Right after this stop at Martha's and Mary's home, Jesus teaches the disciples to pray. I wonder if this story is a reminder of the call to love God - to sit at Jesus' feet and listen and learn - so that we can love neighbor. Just like that Sabbath command is pivotal when we look at the whole of the Ten Commandments, this visit to Martha and Mary's house is a reminder that contemplation and activism - being and doing - both parts of our spiritual lives are important.

What Martha does isn't what Mary does, and it's probably good to remember that. What is appropriate or expected isn't always the way that God's Kingdom comes. Sometimes the Kingdom of God looks different than we thought it would - a woman listening and learning, a Samaritan showing up and helping, a deep truth about God coming from a voice we didn't anticipate. Jesus is always teaching us when we listen.

Elisabeth Johnson writes, "We do know that Jesus invites all of us who are worried and distracted by many things to sit and rest in his presence, to hear his words of grace and truth, to know that we are loved and valued as children of God, to be renewed in faith and strengthened for service. There is need of only one thing: attention to our guest. As it turns out, our guest is also our host, with abundant gifts to give."

It sounds great. Sitting at Jesus' feet. But do you ever struggle? I do. I'm not very good at sitting quietly - or at least not emptying my mind of to-do lists or calls to make or everything else that creeps in. There's always something more to do, but Jesus' challenge is to sit at his feet - perhaps with a sense of humility knowing that we need to learn from him and understand what to do. It's much like the concept of Sabbath rest - we're not loved because of how much we can do; we're loved because God loves us. That may be something Mary has figured out here.

I'm talking about Martha and Mary - two women who are a part of our faith story and remind us about both doing and being present - in the shadow of the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. No matter our politics, Justice Ginsburg's personal integrity and work to seek justice for all people is a powerful witness. Her perseverance and drive are a legacy and a call to remember our own call to love God and love neighbor.

As I read some of her reflections, I was struck by something she said about her own rhythm of work and rest. In 2016, she wrote, "My success in law school, I have no doubt, was in large measure because of baby Jane (her daughter). I attended classes and studied diligently until 4:00 in the afternoon; the next hours were Jane's time, spent at the park, playing silly games or singing funny songs, reading picture books and A.A. Milne poems, and bathing and feeding her. After Jane's bedtime, I returned to law

books with renewed will. Each part of my life provided respite from the other and gave me a sense of proportion.”

Ginsburg’s reflection reminded me of that need we all have to take a rest from doing – and let ourselves spend some time being – being a human being and nurturing our connections with each other and with God. It’s the being that helps us with the doing (and vice versa).

When I was in college, my roommate had a CD of classical music that included a recording of Pachelbel’s Canon in D. It’s a beautiful piece of music, and both of us loved it and encouraged our friends to love it, too. There were many times when we would turn off all of our lights in our small dorm room and take the 5-minute break to listen to the music and find ourselves refreshed. **SHOW SLIDE** – *Almost everything will work better if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.*

So what about sitting at Jesus’ feet? What could we hear and learn? Perhaps we’ll be able to hear the deep-down truth that we’re not defined by our doing, but by our being – beloved by God. Maybe we’ll remember that it doesn’t all rest on us, but that our offerings are a part of all the work that God is doing through all of God’s people – we’re not doing it all alone.

Especially now when there are so many voices, how will we commit ourselves to taking time to hear what Jesus is saying to us? Not listening to a politician or political commentator or celebrity or anyone else, but listening to Jesus – Lord, Savior, Redeemer – giving him our time? What if we took time to read a Gospel over the next week or two weeks? What would we hear? What if we made it priority? **SHOW SLIDE** – *First Jesus, then coffee*

What if we took a few minutes to center our hearts as best we can – at least remembering that God is with us? If we take a moment and get quiet, what is the message? What is the “love God and love neighbor” call right in this moment? What are the barriers that need to be broken down in the name of Jesus - the cultural assumptions that we hold - so that all will know the freedom and peace that comes from Jesus? We have to love God if we want to love neighbor (and also understand that loving neighbor helps us to love God, who is Creator of everyone and everything).

Living our faith in Jesus – following him - requires both active service and quiet devotion. We need to be disciples who sit at his feet so that we can do what he calls us to do. May we seek the balance –hands to serve and minds to listen, learn, think, and pray.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE and the LORD’S PRAYER