

Luke 10:38-42; Exodus 20:17
July 18, 2010

South Plains

What's the Matter with Martha?

Vacation Bible School this year just overflowed with fun that led to friendships, and friendships that led to learning, and learning that led to Jesus Christ. I spent most of the week with the older kids who talked about Deborah, Joseph, Jesus, Solomon and Paul. We used the civil rights movement to illustrate how the virtues of these biblical characters could help us as followers of Jesus Christ in today's world. I'm always a little schizophrenic during Vacation Bible School, torn between having fun and learning, enjoying the stories of the kids but also enjoying the stories of the faith, stories that sound different sitting around a table with markers and glue and beads as well as Bibles.

Reading scripture in the setting of Vacation Bible School allows another dimension of reality to interpret God's word, a dimension we can lose sitting in pews. Does the laughter of VBS distract us from hearing God speak any more than the seriousness of Sunday morning distracts us? The story we read this morning from Luke's gospel lets us peek at some of the distractions preventing Martha from hearing Jesus. Maybe this story can tell us something about how we can hear Jesus more clearly.

I'm intrigued by Martha's worries and distractions because they sound so familiar. Jesus holds up Mary as the model of devotion. She sits attentively at the Lord's feet, listening to his words, absorbing the aura of his presence, her posture the attitude of worship. In the presence of Jesus, that's where I'd want to be. But, most of the time I'm not in that posture. Christ is here today, right now. I believe that's true. But, I'm talking, not listening. I'm worrying about preaching a decent sermon and distracted by all the elements of worship. I'll bet that some of you are distracted from his presence this morning. When the sidewalk was moved for construction, the law of unintended consequences took over. We gave ourselves the option of glancing either at the horses across the street or at people walking between the Manse and the sanctuary. Or, maybe you're worried about something you said or failed to say this week; or are distracted by the weather. Martha's problem is not an isolated case. She is typical of what happens to many of us in the Lord's presence. We're ADHD in worship much of the time, our attention focused on half a dozen things besides worshiping God.

It seems to me that in order to imitate the sister of Martha in her devotion to Jesus Christ, we need to understand Martha. We need to understand ourselves better as distracted, worried worshipers. Here are some possibilities for empathizing with Martha.

Perhaps, she is focused on housework and hostess work. She's a task-oriented person. We know

what that means and why it's important. It gets out of hand when we forget what gives the task value. It's a trap the church falls into when we get so busy doing church work that we forget to pray; we have no energy for praise, no time for relationships. Vacation Bible School demands a lot of preparation and can be physically exhausting on the leaders. This week demonstrated again that both our churches are blessed with teachers and helpers who focus on the children. Sometimes a lesson plan that took hours to prepare has to be tossed aside because a teacher recognizes a teaching moment for a particular student.

A second possibility is that Martha is worried about treating her guest with the proper respect and deference. After all, she is entertaining the Lord Jesus, the special friend of her family, the one who would raise her brother Lazarus from the dead, the rabbi she now thought of as a prophet of God. Once, I witnessed a physical argument after communion on Sunday because two church leaders were so upset over the manner in which the elements of communion had been served. Trying to straighten out the details, they missed the opportunity to sit at Jesus' table and enjoy his fellowship. Martha was missing that same opportunity.

Yet a third possibility is that she feels slighted by her sister Mary who ignores the responsibilities of a hostess in favor of a few minutes with their friend. I am reluctant to criticize the Marthas in this world who keep organizations functioning well. Families are successful

and organizations run smoothly when everybody has a job and each person does his job. A hundred years ago a farm family in Keswick might have a man in charge of the horses and cattle, a wife preparing the meals, an aunt looking after the chickens, the lame uncle tending a vegetable garden and Granny growing flowers. Mary's time with Jesus has upset the balance of duties. Unfortunately, Martha is jealously guarding her job to oversee the household at Mary's expense. Jesus seems to know what Mary really needs: his time, his teaching.

I have to wonder what Martha's anxious complaint does to her relationship with her sister. The fallout from this kind of anxiety can be damaging over time. Every elder, teaching and ruling, runs the risk of privileging the machinery of the church over the people. Churches are such messy affairs because of all the people involved. We have feelings as well as goals, dreams that motivate us more than programs, and fears... always we have fears interrupting our commitments. Mary needs something that is not accounted for in Martha's business plan. So do we.

Finally, I'm guessing that Martha envies Mary's place beside Jesus. She covets Mary's special relationship with the Lord. She wants attention from the rabbi for herself. It's hard to blame her for that. Our gospel hymns celebrate that closeness:
"He walks with me and talks with me."
"Leaning on the everlasting arms."

“There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God.” And, one of my favorite titles although not my favorite hymn, “How Tedious and Tasteless the Hours When Jesus No Longer I See.”

It can be a good thing to covet a close relationship with Christ, unless we seek that spiritual time at someone else’s expense. For whatever reason, Martha does not seem to be able to ask outright if she can join Mary at Jesus’ feet. She refuses to speak directly to her sister. Instead she fusses at Jesus for not caring that she is overworked, and depends on him to tell Mary what she is unwilling to say herself.

I find myself longing for the rest of the story. Does the worrier sit down and become a listener, making worship her work for that afternoon? Or, does she go back to work, grumbling that no one listens to her? I would hope that if she goes back to housework, she has a plan to finish what absolutely has to be done and then to stop to rest with the other two. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus’ rebuke starts her thinking and she can turn to Mary and say, “Mary, I’m tired and I need your help. Can you help me after you’ve sat with Jesus?”

And, what about Mary? Luke records none of her words. The worst thing she could do would be to be to jump up and leave Jesus to help Martha. Jesus wants Mary beside him, and surely wants Martha to be there as well. At best I imagine Mary moving over, giving her sister the better place at the Lord’s feet.

Whatever the conclusion of this incident, Luke tells the story to remind the church of our priorities. Our highest good is to practice the presence of God. As Brother Lawrence has taught us, this does not mean that we do no work. Lawrence washed the dishes and did the most menial jobs while he was communing with God. I’m sure his work distracted him from prayer on many occasions. But, like a compass needle seeking north, Lawrence came back, seeking God.

Part of the freedom of a rural church is the opportunity we have to practice the presence of God without some of the distractions inescapable with larger churches in busier places. The one distraction we can never escape is our interaction with other people. Indeed, the wider we cast our network of relationships within the church and the world, the thicker and richer our faith becomes.

It is because we each have a different way of going about our lives that we learn from each other. When we rub shoulders with the world outside the church our faith must stretch and toughen. The Marys and the Marthas among us are like the thunderstorms that lash the trees even while they water them. We learn, we grow, mature in Jesus Christ together.

If the angel Gabriel came down to us as he came to the Virgin Mary, he’d say, “Fear not, busy people, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is but one thing: the good news that God is present in Jesus.

Practice the knowledge of the presence of God and all these other things will be added to that peace.”