

Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois
July 17, 2016

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Text: Luke 10: 38-42

When it comes to such a short but rich passage as this familiar story of Martha and Mary, we naturally want to fill in the blanks. We want to know more about this oh—so—human story, and the five verses we are given just don't do the trick. Most often, we assume since it starts out, "as they were on their way" and we recall the preceding stories of this journey from Galilee, through Samaria, winding slowly toward Jerusalem, that the whole entourage of disciples and followers are with Jesus. At least, we know they are with him just before when he tells the parable of the Samaritan to the lawyer. And, he is there just after, when he will be teaching them to pray. So, we assume that at the very least, Jesus and the Twelve show up on Martha's doorstep.

And, if that was the case, her tasks would have been many. She wouldn't have had pans of lasagna in the freezer. She wouldn't have had pizza delivery. In fact, she wouldn't have had a text telling her they were coming—at most, perhaps, a youngster from the village might have run on ahead announcing that that man, Jesus, is on his way. So, it would not be surprising to find Martha distracted and upset with her sister, Mary. And, it would seem very odd that Jesus would sound rather scolding in light of the hospitality she was trying to provide.

This time around, though, I am wondering if it wasn't that way at all. Suppose that it really is a simple, little story. Suppose that Jesus had been able to break away from the crowd for a little while to go off to visit with his good friends for just a bit of respite. Suppose that when Martha went off to the kitchen and began to putter and fuss, Mary had begged her to sit with them, to share the simple meal they had planned—surely it could be stretched for one more person. But Martha couldn't stop fussing—only her best was good enough for Jesus. And he said tenderly, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. [Come, join us.] There is need of only one thing."

I shall never forget a Sunday evening long ago when I was a student chaplain at Lutheran General Hospital. Since it was only a three-month course, we were plunged into the realities of pastoral care in an acute trauma center.

Our role was to provide presence and comfort to patients, their families and the staff in times of great crisis and pain. To listen and to pray. But it also meant being the one who contacted family to tell them that their loved one was in the emergency room. The one to facilitate certain difficult but necessary decisions—funeral home arrangements

and organ donations when there was a death; long term care decisions when there was a serious or permanent loss of function. I was terribly anxious!

At first, I coped by focusing on trivia – did I have big enough pockets in my clothing to hold everything I need–pens and paper, pager and keys, all of the forms I might need so I wouldn't have to keep running back to the office? Would I remember how find the Emergency Room–or the Surgical Intensive Care Unit? Would I hear my pager when it went off? Did I have sensible shoes and clothes that I could throw on quickly? Would I even have time to sleep?

On my very first solo night on call, when I would be the only chaplain from early evening until 8 am the next morning, I worried all day long. I walked down the hall to the Emergency Room with the chaplain going off duty. In a gentle voice, he said to me, “My, you are walking awfully fast! Why are you doing that?”

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.”

He went on to remind me that there would be enough hurrying and urgent action by the medical team. The chaplain needed to embody a calm presence. I should walk more slowly, take time on the way to a call to become centered and calm–and to pray.

In the deep, lonely darkness of that night as I tossed and turned on the narrow bed in my cubicle, it was even harder to keep the anxiety at bay. To pass the time, I gazed out of the window that overlooked the Emergency Room, watching the steady stream of people in and out, imagining why they were coming–and wondering when–if–I would be paged. Scenario after scenario scrolled through my mind like a videotape. Would I be able to handle whatever came my way? Would I respond appropriately?

Sometime during those desolate hours, I came to understand that I had to dive deep down into the silence of God's love – like Mary, I had to sit at Jesus' feet for a while – empty myself of my fears, my preconceived notions – and be totally open to God. Unlike Mary, I could not stay there at Jesus' feet. It was not either/or – listening or acting. No, I had to take that peace and love and try to hold it within me as I went forth to minister in whatever way might be needed.

“There is need of only one thing,” Jesus said. “Mary has chosen the best part.” [You, too can have the best part, Martha.] You can have it, Gloria. And you, and you, and you. You see, Jesus loves you just as you are. In your quiet prayerfulness. In your hectic striving to do it all.

This is the grace that we are given – the gift that is free – no matter how far short you think that you fall. No matter how heavy your life might weigh on you. You are beloved and you need just that one thing.

In his book, *Blessings of the Cosmos: Benedictions from the Aramaic Words of Jesus*, Neil Douglas-Klotz translates:

KJV: Come unto me, all ye that labour (A) and are heavy laden (B), and I will give you rest.(C)

Come to me,
all of you, all of yourself,
in your frenzied weariness,
your movement without end,
your action without purpose,
not caring in your fatigue
whether you live or die.(A)

Come enmeshed by what you carry,
the cargo taken on by your soul,
the burdens you thought you desired,
which have constantly swollen
and now exhaust you. (B)

Come like lovers to your first tryst:
I will give you peace and
renewal after constant stress:
Your pendulum can pause
between here and there,
between being and not-being.(C)

KJV: Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;(A) for I am meek and lowly in heart:(B) and ye shall find rest unto your souls.(C)

Why not absorb yourself in my work –
here's newly plowed earth ready
for a crop of guidance and illumination.
Jump into the whirlpool of wisdom,
the impassioned spiral of understanding your self.(A)
Here's the peace you're looking for:
the softening of the heart's rigid
feelings and thoughts.(B)

In my way, you will find a
refuge of renewable energy

within the struggle and grasping
of your subconscious soul.
In my way, when you
wrestle for the knowledge of your Self,
the self you find finds rest.(C)

The one thing that is needful. The better part.

Amen.