

Proper 11 C 2019

Luke 10:38-42

We have so much time,
And so little to do.

*(Who can name the source
of this immortal line?)ⁱ*

(And by the way,
this is not the first time
Willy Wonka and his Chocolate Factory,
And Charlie, and Veruca Salt and Violet
And the rest
Have found their way into the pulpit with me.
But what synchronicity
That they are here with us in Denver right now at the DCPA.)

We have so much time,
And so little to do.
Yes, Willy Wonka goes on to say,
Wait a minute! Strike that!
Reverse it!

But the words remain as an invitation,
Picked up, shaken loose from their story,
And transformed into a new kind of wisdom
By one of the great teachers
Of contemporary centering prayer.ⁱⁱ

We have so much time,
And so little to do.

The Martha in us would never say that,
But perhaps our inner Mary would.

What does it mean to choose the better part,
As Mary did?
How can we, who are so caught up in time,

become faithful followers
Of the one in whom time and eternity meet?

What can Martha and Mary offer us,
as we enter their story today?

From generation to generation,
We have heard this story
And believed that it offered us clear direction,
One simple instruction about how to be faithful.
Be still,
Listen.
If only it were as easy as it is simple.

Especially for women,
This story has seemed to offer impossible advice
On how to follow Jesus.
Let go your busyness,
Stop cooking and cleaning and taking care of everyone,
And sit still.
Advice that, if followed,
Would almost certainly create resentment,
Alienation,
And frustration.

Generation after generation of women
Have been offered this story
In the full expectation
That they would proudly reject it,
Proclaiming with satisfaction,
I'm a Martha,
And imagine what would happen if I weren't.

We demand that.
Even cloistered nuns of long ago, remember,
Had their families bringing dirty laundry and mending
To the convent door.ⁱⁱⁱ
There was no retreat into silent prayer for long,
The demands were always knocking at the door.
As they were for Martha.

And so, women and men and children,
We have so often lived in uneasy relationship
With this gospel story.

We can't help it.
It's part of our human frailty
That time after time,
Offered a story of liberation,
A chance for transformation,
We take only a portion of the story,
And, while we do some good with it,
We fall short of the promise.

So let's take another look at Martha and Mary today,
And see what we can discover.

First, who are they?

What if we stop needing to break them apart,
Into two individuals?
We so often need to separate things in order to understand them:
Ideas, people.
We divide into light and dark,
Good and bad,
Happy and sad.

No matter how mature, sophisticated,
Faithful we are,
Something in us is always doing this.
Thinking in dualities.
We can learn,
As we go on,
To recognize and overcome
Our tendency to divide,
But it is always there.

So we divide Martha and Mary
And watch Martha rush around serving,
And Mary sitting and listening.

What if we let go the need to divide,

And think about unity?
Let's imagine for a moment
That Mary Martha is one person.
And whoever you are,
Man, woman, non-binary,
Queer,
In transition,
Young, old, somewhere in between,
Whoever you are,
Let yourself enter the experience
Of Martha Mary,
And see what you see.
Feel what you feel.
Hear what you hear.

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

In your imagination,
Go deeper into the story.
Imagination is a spiritual exercise,
An act of co-creating
With the Holy One who speaks a world into being.
So let yourself imagine.

Mary Martha is a householder.
And she understands the central place of hospitality
In the faith, life, and culture
Of her people.

She welcomes Jesus,
And probably like Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre,
She starts to make ready a meal,
Brings water for his feet,
Finds him a resting place.

Now, how does it feel,
To welcome an unexpected guest,
Who turns out to be charismatic,
Compassionate, compelling?

Who would not want to sit at his feet,
And listen all day?
But to serve as gracious host
Is an obligation,
A sacred duty.

Her values and her desire,
Her responsibility and her longing,
Are at odds.

And so she worries,
And is distracted.

We tend to hear her words to Jesus,
Tell my sister to help me,
As scolding and shaming.
Here I am working,
And she is sitting.
Tell her to help me,
As she should.

But what if, whether she knows it or not,
Those words are a plea.

Tell my sister,
The contemplative part of my busy self,
To help me.

Tell my sister,
The part of me that knows what is most true and right,
To help me.

Help the part of me
That recognizes the truth
Of those utterly countercultural words,

We have so much time,
And so little to do,
Help that part of me to speak
In a clear and calm voice,
Above the worry and distraction.

There is only one most important thing.
Be still,
And know who is holy,
Who is true.
This is the way to life.

After that,
All the tasks will fall into place.
They are still there,
But they don't have to worry us.
They are still there,
And need to be done,
But done with the one true thing
Firmly fixed at their heart.

If we try to do all the work ourselves –
And I at least know what that is like –
Then we are worried and distracted.
We fall short
If we think it's all about us.

Only if we open up the quiet place within –
The receptive Mary place –
Can we be at peace,
And go about our appointed tasks
Knowing that it does not depend only on us,
That deep at the heart of things it will be alright,
Even if we fall short or fail.

Only when Mary and Martha
Live in harmony with each other
Moving within us
In a dance of action and contemplation,
Can we be free.

Mary's stillness and prayer
Keep Martha from burning out
As she engages the works of social justice.

Martha's energy
Keeps Mary from sinking into self reflection
When her companions are in need.

Mary's discipleship
Shows Martha meaning in her busy chores.

Martha's service
Honors the human need
For food,
Clothing, shelter,
Companionship.

Together,
They follow Jesus
Into a new life.

With Jesus in her home,
The center of her self,
Martha Mary discerns the truth,
And it never leaves her.

Her busy side and her contemplative side
Make a whole.
She leads an undivided life.
She is free to serve,
Free to sit.
Free to follow,
Free to abide.

Free to show us the way,
If we can see her in the fullness
Of her transformed life.

Mary is centered in the eternal now.
So Martha has all the time she needs.

She has so much time.
And there is only one thing she needs to do.

And we too,
Have all the time we need.

ⁱ Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. *Prizes were awarded to those who knew the answer.*

ⁱⁱ Carl Arico

ⁱⁱⁱ cf. Dava Sobel, *Galileo's Daughter*