

The Better Part

Luke 10:38-42

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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As promised, we are taking a few Sundays in the days after Easter Sunday to wrap up our 2023 Faith Questions sermon series.

I received too many questions this year to fit them all in between Epiphany and Lent, so I tried to tackle the more “issue-based” questions in January and February and left the remaining three more “text-based” questions for the Easter season.

Actually, two of the remaining three aren’t questions. Two people simply asked to hear a sermon on a particular passage of Scripture.

So, today we’re looking at the story of Mary and Martha. Next Sunday, we’re looking at the question of when and where the story of Genesis come from.

After that, we’ll have a two-week hiatus—Jon Olfert (Camp Valaqua) will be here on April 30 and then Henry Janzen will be preaching on May 7 (my quarterly Sunday away).

We’ll wrap up the Faith Questions series on May 14 with a sermon on Psalm 96.

So that’s the road map that will take us from now until the doorstep of Pentecost.

So, Mary and Martha.

I’m going to go out on a limb and assume that even though Mary gets the praise in this story, we have a lot of Martha sympathizers here today.

She's slaving away in the kitchen while her sister is lounging with Jesus in the living room. Martha is scurrying about getting things done while Mary simply sits at Jesus' feet listening to what he says.

I suspect this sits a bit awkwardly with us. Shouldn't Jesus praise the industrious hard worker?

Shouldn't he have an understanding word or two for the one who recognizes the important task of hospitality?

You can imagine Martha storming around the kitchen, making a little more noise than is strictly necessary, making sure those enjoying some leisurely time with Jesus know that *some* people don't have that luxury.

When she finally decided to make her case, she can't even bring herself to address her sister. Mary is surely within earshot as Martha says—to Jesus— “Don't you care that my sister (she doesn't even use her name) has left me to do all the work? Tell her to help me!”

It's a scene that I suspect few of us have trouble resonating with. I have no doubt that my parents could recall a time or two when they sent their sons off to do some task and one of us came back demanding that somebody do something about their lazy brother!

And yet... Jesus doesn't follow the script. Instead of chiding Mary or offering Martha the recognition she craves, he says:

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Jesus commends Mary for choosing the “better part.”

Which, once we get over our surprise at Jesus' response, almost certainly sends our minds spinning on what would seem a rather importation question: “What is this better part?”

Presumably we who read Jesus' words all these years later would also like to choose the same!

We'll get there. But first, a few observations.

First, it's significant that Mary is at Jesus' feet at all. This is the posture of a disciple and would have been extremely rare if not unheard of for a woman at the time.

It is yet another example of how Jesus' life and ministry embraced and elevated women.

There is a whole history of Christian reflection on what's more important, contemplation or activism, theologizing or service and how should we calibrate these two aspects of the Christian life.

We should not miss the fact that in many ways this conversation is anchored in and proceeds out of a story with women in the starring role.

Second, a common interpretation of this passage is that Jesus is criticizing Martha's "busyness," her focus on "doing" rather than "being." Martha should just relax, not take herself so seriously. Things will get done. It's ok to take a break. Just be present in the moment, Martha.

But I don't think Jesus is saying we shouldn't busy ourselves with doing things in the life of faith.

He had a lot to say about loving our neighbour and about the inbreaking kingdom of God, which is good news for the poor, the downtrodden, the sick, the outcast.

All of this requires activity. Jesus is not saying that we should all just sit around idly thinking deep spiritual thoughts or contemplating theological mysteries.

So, this is not a contrast between contemplation (good) vs. activism (bad).

This is not the nature of Jesus' critique. As one commentator put it, "Jesus is not going after Busy Martha, but Worried and Distracted Martha."¹

¹ James A. Wallace, "Homiletical Perspective on Luke 10:38-42" in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 265.

Worried and distracted.

This is where I want to spend the rest of my sermon because this is where I think most of us live.

One commentator I read this week said that the “root meaning of the word ‘worry’ is ‘strangle’ or ‘seize by the throat and tear.’” and that the “root meaning of the word ‘distraction’ is ‘a separation or a dragging apart of something that should be whole.’”

Ultimately, she said, these violent sounding words point to “states of mind that render us incoherent, divided, and un-whole.”²

This week I listened to an interview on CBC’s *Tapestry* with a spiritual director and writer named Casey Tygrett. The topic was “restlessness.”

That certainly seemed a relevant topic, at least to me. Maybe it’s a midlife thing. But who among us hasn’t felt at least a *little* bit restless over the last few years?

The interview sent me on a rabbit trail that led to Tygrett’s blog where I read these words from a recent post. They seemed to connect well to the story of Mary and Martha:

For many of us, we are constantly in the flow of a million great and small “attendings.”

We attend to our job—whether it is something we do for a living or something we live out for others such as parenting and caregiving. We give attention to our health, whether the health of our body or of our relationships...

Of course, there are other things that draw our attention in a day, week, or moment’s time—things specific to us and our story, our situation, or our family.

We become so focused on these “attendings” that we can become strangers to our own life. We can become part of the odd paradox of going through the tasks and duties of our life but as some sort of passive participant. It

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2282-only-one-thing>

is possible to feel as if we are simply spectators to some event that is well beyond both our control and our influence.

The result of being a stranger to our own soul and our own life is the formation of a jagged edge.

A tear in the fabric of our life begins to grow the longer we disconnected from ourselves, watching life and faith and relationships *happen* to us rather than fully participating in them.³

Spectators to some event that is well beyond both our control and our influence...

Strangers to our own soul...

A tear in the fabric of our life begins to grow...

A jagged edge begins to form...

I don't know if any of these phrases would have described Martha. I don't know if these kinds of things were at the root of her worry and her distraction.

But I wonder, does any of it resonate with us? Do we become so focused on a million "attendings" great and small that we just flit about from task to task, staying busy, ignoring or forgetting the better part?

Have we lost the ability to attend to that which matters?

Jesus commends Mary for choosing the better part. The better part, in the story, is something rather simple.

The text describes Mary as doing one thing. Listening. Listening to Jesus' words.

We obviously cannot physically sit at Jesus' feet. But we can listen. We can meditate on his words in the gospels. We can pay attention to his life. We can seek to emulate him.

³ <https://www.caseytygrett.com/currentblog/to-return>

We can (and we must) try to let Jesus speak for himself, rather than squeezing him through the wearisome lenses of left, right, liberal, conservative that we so easily do.

(The longer I have tried, imperfectly, to listen to Jesus, the more I have discovered that he says plenty to make everyone squirm, regardless of their political allegiances.)

We can resist the impulse that we have to constantly be doing.

So often our doing is a way of avoiding listening. It's way easier to get busy doing something measurable rather than praying. Or reading. Or sitting in silence.

Again, activity isn't bad. Jesus isn't saying that it is.

What he is saying, I think, that our activity must proceed from the proper source if it is to have lasting value, if it is to form us well as human beings.

This has an application to the church. I've said this before in many ways, but I'll say it again.

If who we are and what we do as followers of Jesus does not begin and end with Jesus, if it is not sustained and animated by a deep devotion to him and his way in the world, if it is not guided by his teaching, if it does not depend on his finished work, if it does not cling to his grace and mercy and seek to extend this outward....

If Jesus is not the center of all we do and all we say and all we are as a people, then we will be little more than a social club or political organization that lines up with all the other social clubs and political organizations in the world, scurrying about, busying ourselves with many things while neglecting the one thing that is needed most.

The world does not need another one of these.

The world needs the church to be the church for the reasons that the church has always been the church.

It also has an application to us as individuals.

I read these words in my prayer book this morning.

Grant that I, Lord, may not be anxious about earthly things, but love things heavenly; and even now, while I am placed among things that are passing away, hold fast to those that shall endure...

I have prayed these words before, at times rushing past them mechanically, at times supplying a quick inventory of the things in my life that tend to make me anxious, at times pondering the heavenly things that I ought to be loving instead of the earthly things that so easily take hold of my fickle attentions.

Surely at least part of “the better part” that Jesus tells Martha (and us) to choose is to learn how to live well while we are placed among things that are passing away.

So, I decided I would end my sermon by making a list of all the things that made me (and possibly us) anxious, and then to tell us to set those aside and choose to focus on Jesus instead.

I made the list, wrote the ending. And then scrapped it all. I decided that I would end not with a list but with a description or an example of someone who has tried to choose the better part.

Last week, I mentioned the story of Zena Hitz. She is an analytic philosopher who converted to Roman Catholicism in her thirties, sold her possessions, left her job, and spent three years living in a Catholic community where she took vows of simplicity, chastity, and obedience.

This week, her book arrived in my mailbox. *A Philosopher Looks at the Religious Life*. As I read her own description of her motivations for choosing a religious life, I couldn't help but think of the story of Mary and Martha.

Here's what she says:

My attraction to the religious life grew in intensity corresponding to my discontent with the life I was leading. I was restless, bored, and frustrated with the tedium of a moderately successful academic career. I had had enough of teaching for money, studying for status, loving in order to advance myself. I was tired of using myself and being used; **I wanted to live a life that could not be bought or sold...**

I still wanted to think and learn and teach, but I wanted to do so out of love for human beings, not to score points in an invisible game where victory always slipped just out of reach...

I sought to remedy my selfishness by adding on new activities, various forms of volunteer service in the community: hospice work, literacy tutoring, and finally jail ministry. That broke my life into fragments: loving my neighbor here, earning money there, scrabbling for status here, simple acts of service there. I kept putting on and off my human skin, as if I couldn't make up my mind about it. **I wanted a life that was dedicated, wholehearted, and governed by what I aspired to hold as my deepest values, love of God and love of neighbor.**⁴

This, I think, describes what it is to choose “the better part.” Not that we must all renounce everything and go take vows in a Catholic community. Not that we must all sell our possessions and walk away from our careers.

But I think each one of us, on some level, wants that last sentence to describe our own lives. Or at least *wants* to want it.

“The better part” is a life dedicated, wholehearted, and governed by Jesus. Like Mary, I want to listen to him.

May God help each one of us, in these first days of the Easter season, with the resurrection of Jesus still ringing in our ears, to choose the better part.

Amen.



⁴ Zena Hitz, *A Philosopher Looks at the Religious Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 6.