

Get Set, Ready, Go

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Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he 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." (NRSV) The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The story of Mary and Martha is a familiar one for those of us who have been in the church for a while. The story that immediately precedes Mary and Martha is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Pastor Tim masterfully reflected on that story last week. If you missed it, I highly encourage you to listen to it on line. In the parable of the Good Samaritan the one who shows hospitality and acted neighborly is applauded and we are encouraged to go and do likewise. Here in the story of Mary and Martha, the one who shows hospitality appears to be the one chastised. One might think it doesn't pay to be nice, but perhaps we need to re-examine this text and see what is really going on here.

Jesus and company were passing through a certain village and Martha welcomed the entire crowd into her home. Now, Jesus seldom traveled solo. There could have been three others, Peter, James, and John. They went a lot of places with Jesus. Or, there could have been Jesus plus the 12 named disciples. The last time Jesus talked to people before today's text, there were 70 in the crowd. Jesus sent 70 disciples out two by two to minister in the cities he would eventually travel to. The 70 returned to Jesus with a praise report on all the wonderful things that happened when they spoke in the name of Jesus. So we really don't know how many were with him—4, 12, 70. The text just says **"they went on their way"** And, however many there were, all were invited by Martha to spend time in her home.

So where are my home chefs and entertainers? Where are my people who love to have people come over to your home? You know what it takes to prepare an impromptu meal for 4, 12, or more people. It takes focus, organization, creativity, culinary skill, and love, You cannot have the gift of hospitality without loving people. You have to love your people and not be resentful that you didn't have a week's notice to prepare.

Martha didn't hesitate to welcome the group into her home. Having the gift of hospitality is a precious gift that I admire. When someone unexpectedly drops by, those with the gift of hospitality are not freaked out wondering whether there are toys all over the house (in my case it is dog toys), or whether the floor is swept, or if there is enough food in the pantry. They step up and serve their guest with joy.

Those with the gift of hospitality know that showing hospitality is not really about the food. Hospitality is honoring your guests and making them feel welcomed and comfortable. In Martha, Mary, and Jesus' tradition high value was placed on showing hospitality to one's guests. Protecting and caring for one's guests goes back to Hebrew Scriptures when Abraham cared for the strangers who came to his home. When we celebrate communion or the Lord's supper, we welcome everyone to the table of the Lord. One of my favorite biblical texts is Hebrew 13:2 **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels (unaware) without knowing it.**

So there is high, high regard in showing hospitality in the scriptures. The focus of hospitality is the **one** being served—not the food, not the drink, or the decor. In this story the focus of Martha's hospitality is Jesus and his friends. Martha's focus was not Mary, or herself, or the food prep. It was Jesus. Getting everything in order for Jesus was Martha's initial focus.

Now Mary had the same focus. Mary's focus was the same as Martha's focus. Mary's sole focus was also Jesus. But she wanted to listen to what Jesus had to say. There was a group gathered in the other room listening to Jesus and that was the **only place** Mary wanted to be. Her sole focus was also Jesus. What made it even more special was that Jesus welcomed her to listen. For Mary Jesus was in the house. What could have been of greater importance? Mary responded to Jesus in ways traditionally reserved for men. And, Jesus was OK with that.

So what happened? If both were focused on Jesus, why the rift? Well, the texts tells us that Martha got distracted. Martha lost focus. Martha started to focus on all the tasks she considered critical instead of maintaining focus on the one she was serving. The tasks became the focus of her concern, not Jesus. They say the devil is in the details. Martha got sidetracked by the details.

How often have we gotten bogged down in the weeds, the details, and lost focus on the One we are serving?

God calls us to reach out to our neighbors and share the good news of Jesus Christ. We commit to walking around the neighborhood and inviting our Capital Hill neighbors to visit us, but when the day comes it is raining and we can't find our umbrellas. Or, we can't go out this week because the copy machine broke and we can't print flyers. Or, I want to talk to people after church that are new and let them know they are welcome, but the game comes on at 1 pm and we are in the playoffs so I have to get home. We lose our focus.

Or perhaps you've prayed for a new job and got it. Hallelujah that new job pays enough for you to catch up on all the bills. Instead of praising God for the gift of employment, you lament that the commute will be 10 minutes longer, the uniform makes you look fat, and you have to work weekends. Instead of praising God from whom all blessings flow, we lose focus and become anxious.

We pray for good health, and a heart of passion to do the work of justice and to stand with the marginalized, the oppressed, the locked out and the locked up. Yet instead of thanking God for a strong back, strong arms, and a mind that still works, we complain that our knees hurt, we need new glasses, and our hair is thinning. We get distracted and lose our focus for our ministry.

When we lose focus on God and the gifts of grace given us, we end up complaining about what we don't have, or what we can't do, or what someone else is doing. When we get anxious and distracted, we complain and wonder if God cares about us.

Martha lost her focus on Jesus, and her ability to use her heart and culinary gifts to serve. Instead, she focused on all the tasks that had to be completed before the meal could be placed on the table. Martha went to Jesus, interrupted him, and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Well, the obvious answer to that question was no! Since Martha was on a roll, she kept going....Jesus, tell Mary to help me."

Now let's take a deep breath before we jump all over Martha about her bad attitude and her command that Jesus do something. I'm sure some of us have told God a time or two what to do?

How many prays have we prayed telling God what we need and what God has to do. God, I need you to fix this situation at work by Monday morning. Not only do we tell God what to do, we give God a deadline. I know some of you have prayed, God, you had better fix my husband before I kill him. God you had better put some sense into those kids before I put them all out. God, I need that car. God if you want me to go to church, you will find me a parking spot up close. Dr. Samuel McKinney would remind the Mount Zion congregation that God is not a cosmic bellhop.

So if we are honest, we have had our demanding moments too. We have lost focus and taken our eyes off God and the ministry we are called to do and gotten tangled in the weeds and the details.

Jesus said, Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things, when only one thing is really important. It was a rebuke when Martha heard her name called twice. Martha was rightly concerned about the role society said she and her sister should fulfill. But Jesus wanted to free her from the constraints of tradition and free her to follow her head and her heart. Martha could have taken a break and sat at Jesus' feet and listened for inspiration and encouragement.

There is value in listening to the Spirit. We need to sit at the feet of Jesus and let his healing words mend our wounded, broken hearts. We must stop long enough to reflect on the One who calls us to

To bring good news to the poor.

To proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

To let the oppressed go free,

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Before we run out and do, we must sit and find out what to do. Listening to God and for God is a blessing that will not be taken away from those who pursue it. We live in a world that loves to multi-task. I saw a guy ride a

bike, smoke a cigarette and talk on the phone all at once. In my neighborhood I see people walking their dogs, with earbuds in, and texting—paying no attention to the cars that are coming their way.

Attending to duties, will choke us like the seed that fell among the thorns, if we do not balance the doing and the hearing. When the hearing and the doing are in sync, the realm of God is close at hand. The kingdom of God upon us.

Mary listened to the Holy One for instruction on what she should do. Are we willing to be still and listen for the voice of God? Are we willing to stop talking to God and listen for God?

Once we hear, we must find courage to go. At some point we have to put on our Martha aprons and do something! We cannot sit and just keep listening. We need to use our hearts, heads, hands, and feet as we listen for the Spirit's direction and then move in the Spirit's power to do the work of the Lord.

We are to stay focused individually and as a congregation on the one who calls us to serve. Yes, Mary needed Martha and Martha needed Mary. We honor God in our doing and in our listening, as long as we do it all to the glory of God. We are called to imitate the best in Mary and called to imitate the best of Martha. Most of all we are to keep our focus keenly on the One who is our Rock, our Shelter, and our Redeemer.

Please stand as you are able and sing, #539 Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant?