The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 21, 2019

***"Can’t You See I’m Busy?"***

Genesis 18:1-10a ~ Psalm 15 ~ Luke 10:38-42

Call me Martha! Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by all I need to do … by the internal pressure I feel to do it well. And of course, it's usually when I am feeling the most exhausted and overwhelmed with it all, that someone makes a joke about pastors only working a half day a week.

Sometimes I feel so overwhelmed with the bad news in the world … the number of people caught in poverty and war and epidemics … the distance between the wealthy few and the suffering poor. I want to help make the world a better place, but often I feel like I'm trying to fill the Grand Canyon with a demitasse spoon. I can't keep up with the river eroding things at the bottom. I feel like giving up.

I really don't mean to whine this morning. Actually, I love what I do … I love being a pastor. I love being your pastor! But sometimes, you see, I’m a Martha … and so are you. It seems like everybody I talk to these days feels too busy … bordering on burn out … "worried and distracted by many things." We get too busy for each other. It isn’t just that we have too much to do … it’s also the weight of the psychic burden that we carry … the anxiety and anger … and the damage it does to our souls and our relationships … that takes its toll. That’s what we see happening in the story of Martha and Mary.

Martha and Mary lived with their brother Lazarus in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. We know them best from the story of Lazarus' death and resuscitation in the Gospel of John. In Luke's story here, Lazarus isn't even mentioned. Most likely, he's sitting with the men, listening to the Teacher, while the women are supposed to be providing all the essential services of hospitality. But that's *another* whole sermon! What interests Luke is that Mary isn't doing her customary duty. Instead of helping with all the necessary tasks, she's sitting with Jesus, too, which leaves a double duty for her hard-working sister Martha. Martha notices this … and she notices that Jesus *doesn't* seem to notice. So, she rattles the pans in the kitchen a little louder than she needs to. She clears her throat a few times and coughs as she sets the table. She goes outside and beats a rug a little too fiercely. She gives her sister one of those burn-a-hole-through-a-six-inch-steel-plate looks as she brings Jesus a cup of cool water. But Mary is oblivious … as are the disciples … as is the Teacher.

Martha finally blows. She storms in from the kitchen and accosts … not her sister or her brother, but … her honored guest! *"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"* (Luke 10:40). How many times have we asked that question … prayed that prayer? "Lord, don't you care? Don't you care about what we are trying to do here? Don't you care about what's happening to us? Won't you send us some help, or give us some rest?" Poor Martha! In her earnest effort to be the perfect host, she violates the first rule of hospitality … pay attention to the needs of your guest. Instead, she is rude and intrusive and tries to triangulate Jesus into a family dispute. I've seen this before. Religion is hardly ever so pathological as when family members try to use Jesus against one another.

It makes you wonder how Mary and Martha got along ordinarily. Maybe Jesus was getting caught in a family system here. Martha sounds here a lot like the jealous older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Was she always picking on Mary … always putting her down? Was Mary typically irresponsible and insensitive to her sister … unwilling to do her share around the house? Are we dealing with two archetypes here … the responsible versus the care-free … or even the oppressed laborer versus the oblivious privileged? Sometimes we take roles in our families and fight over the roles we have chosen. Who made Martha responsible for everything? It is probably her *own* inner sense of what needs to be done when Lazarus and Mary don’t care if it gets done or not.

On the other hand, some things have to get done! Can we blame Martha for blowing up over Mary’s irresponsibility and selfishness? Who hasn't felt that way before? Call me "Martha," but I see her point. It isn't fair! I want Jesus to honor Martha's anger. I want him to correct the injustice. I *really* want him to say, "*Lazarus*, get off your lazy haunches and help your sister!" I want him to say, "Martha, I am sorry! We've all been insensitive to you. We'll all pitch in, and then you can join us, too." But Jesus doesn't say any of that. He says, *"Martha, Martha…"*

I love that part! Isn’t that’s just like Jesus? He calls her by name … with compassion and concern and love. He calls her by name, not once, but twice … because that is usually what it takes to get our attention. He calls her by name the same way he calls us, saying "Pam, Pam! … Buddy, Buddy! … Janet, Janet! … Roger, Roger!" Jesus knows your name. He knows what’s happening with you. He calls you out from your strife and stress to find healing and joy in his presence. Jesus *does* see Martha. He *does* understand what’s going on with her. And he honors her needs when he calls her by name.

*"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her"* (Luke 10:41-42). Instead of correcting the injustice, Jesus tells Martha to "chill out." (But I have to tell you, when somebody tells me to “chill out,” my professional wrestler persona comes out … “Bone Crusher Biggs” … and I’m ready to jump from the ropes to the mat!) The last thing Martha would have expected was that Jesus would take Mary’s side. And, Mary's quite the feminist, isn't she? She refuses to play the role … submit to the men … miss this rare opportunity to sit with Jesus. Mary obviously hasn't read any resolutions regarding a woman's place in relation to men in the Bible. And neither has Jesus!

Is Jesus affirming contemplation over service in a hierarchy of spiritual expression? No, Luke places this story right after the parable of the Good Samaritan, which encourages us to be active helpers … doing good to our neighbors in need … those who are our neighbors by virtue of the fact that they *are* in need. But this Samaritan ministry we are given is hard and thankless. It's so easy to be overwhelmed, like Martha … to start asking, "What about me? Who's going to help me?" And if we aren't careful, our well-intentioned well-doing may make us bitter and judgmental … cynical, and counterproductive.

All of us Marthas need to get over ourselves. Our work is *not* God's last and only hope. We're *not* the most important people in the world. The whole dominion of God in justice and mercy *doesn't* depend entirely on us. And we need to remember why we are doing this work in the first place … and it isn't so that we can feel good about how good we are when others aren't so good. Sometimes, we need to stop long enough to sit quietly at the Lord's feet and listen … to be renewed … to be redirected. But we hard-working, idealistic, perfectionistic Marthas have a hard time stopping for anything, especially meditation or reflection or prayerful listening. It feels like wasted time. What we usually do is redouble our efforts … try to be more productive with our time … work harder still until we collapse or become so bitter that we quit altogether. Jesus does see Martha and what Martha needs. Martha needs to stop and spend some time on her most important relationship.

The words of Rabbi Tarfon have become a great comfort to the Martha in me: *"It is not yours to finish the task … but neither are you free to desist from it."* Meaning: we aren't going to remove all suffering from the world. We aren't going to repair every oppressive system. We aren’t even going to get our own sisters or brothers to straighten up and fly right. We must do what we can … and trust the rest to God. And doing what we can means knowing our limits … getting the Sabbath rest that God created us to need … laying down our burdens from time to time just to sit at Jesus' feet.

I don't think Jesus is saying that we should let the needs of the world go and only turn our attention to heaven while other people take care of us. He *isn't* saying "*Always* be Mary" here. He's saying, "*Don't always* be Martha." He's saying, "Don't get so busy working for me that you forget me." The Bible makes it clear enough that spirituality without service is barren and selfish. But this story wants to remind us that service without spirituality is exhausting and hopeless. So, call me "Martha." But sometimes, call me "Mary," too.

Ann Lamott tells this story of her family:

*Thirty years ago, my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."*

Just when you are feeling overwhelmed … that's when you need to stop and sit at Jesus' feet for a while. Let him put his arm around you and comfort you. Let him guide you into what needs to be done. Let him remind you that while the world needs fixin' something awful, it isn't hopeless. And it's not all up to you to fix. Do what you can. "Bird by bird, Buddy ... just take it bird by bird." Tackle it one task at a time. Laugh while you work. Trust God to finish it. And especially, make time for prayer.

Don't lose touch with the One who came to bring you joy … who performed his first miracle at a wedding feast … who compared the dominion of God to one long party … who told us, *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* He's here with us now. So, shall we stop and lay down our burdens? Shall we rest in his embrace?

Shall we pray?

Jesus, our Savior, our Sovereign, our Friend, thank you for calling us to worship and silence and prayer. Lead us beside the still waters and into the green pastures. Restore our souls for your service. Show us when we need to be Martha … responsible, busy, doing more than our part to meet the needs of our neighbors and change the evil structures of our society. But show us also when we need to be Mary … quiet, listening, sitting at your feet, letting you change us. Most of all, make us so grateful that you have come to visit that we give you first place and full attention, and enjoy our times with you, best friend, loving partner, sheltering Savior. Amen.