

## Proper 11 Year C - Luke 10:38-42

I have to identify as Martha this morning. Why? Is it because I value projecting an image out into the world, making myself look busy? Does my productivity somehow equal my self-worth in my mind and heart? Am I telling myself stories about other people who just don't seem to have their act together? Do I project my personal feelings of inadequacy on others? Am I mad because I do all the cooking around here? Perhaps I have fallen into an ancient trap for preachers who have in fact stopped preaching and started meddling where I don't belong?

I wanted to avoid this text this morning. I was moving along through Luke's Gospel with you all this past couple of weeks and we had some good times? Am I right? The Good Samaritan is an all time greatest hit of the bible. We read that last week. But I wanted to leave this week's part out. But what was I gonna do, preach on Amos? "The dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!" Joking aside, I like the prophet Amos, and I will preach on the Old Testament more in due time. The reason I wanted to avoid this text is the sordid history its interpretation has with regard to the role of women. That Mary is just a prop to do something shocking like sit at Jesus's feet as only a male disciple would do... That Martha is a stereotypical busybody flitting around the house like a chicken with her head cut off when she should just slow down and listen to Jesus like a good little girl. This is yet another text that has had violence done to it in its interpretation that has then been turned into labeling at best and subjugation at worst for those who think others best place is to stay in the kitchen.

I don't want to downplay the misuse of this text, but there is a particular reason I cannot turn away from it today. The thing that distracts Martha... the thing that Jesus accuses her of being anxious and troubled about... the thing that she desperately hoped to get Jesus to impress upon her sister Mary.. the act that Martha is so vigourously engaged with... is SERVICE or in Greek – di-a-ko-nain- She is deaconing. In fact she is deaconing so hard that Jesus has to call her out for it.

I am telling you that hit me like a ton of bricks. I was ordained a deacon in the one holy, Catholic and apostolic church only 43 days ago. I am still working on the callous that goes right here. And I am sorry if I am just preaching to me this morning. I'm gonna tell y'all I have done some amazing stuff in these past 43 days. I mean I have been deaconing hard. But it don't mean much if I can't hear the words of Jesus. I don't mean that in the way that idolizes Mary over Martha.

I don't mean it in the way that certain voices claiming to speak in the interest of mental health and self-care demonize good and hard work. I subscribe to the Garrison Keillor middle ground, "Be Well. Do good work. And Keep in touch." It is harder to live in that flesh and blood world where the rug that Mary is sitting on is dirty because I just didn't get to the vacuuming. And where Mary is just hanging out with Jesus because it is good to see a friend you have cried with at a time where you don't need to cry anymore. These two complex characters invite Jesus into their home with all the awkward stuff of ancient culture has to bring with it. They each have their own ways of being with Jesus, but Martha is leaning a little harder into it. Martha just wants to do a good job for her friend and indeed her Lord. Just like how I am trying so hard to be a good deacon. I just want to be a good boy. I want to do a good job being a deacon, serving, bringing the needs of the world to the attention of the church.

What Jesus is reminding us, me, Martha, everyone who di-a-ko-nains- who serves... is maybe don't try so hard. Live your service out of a sense of true identity given to us by God, not earned, not validated by our peers, not confirmed by anxiety, not verified by worrying into the night, not by putting on special clothes... Christian people are marked by a forgiveness that goes before us and after us. Our witness to the world is grace, good news that I messed up and own up to it and so can you and there is freedom in that. We didn't have to earn it. We don't have to be good little boys and girls... or at least we don't have to be to be beloved of God. I was shocked when at a particular time in my life where I was trying very hard to serve God, to love my neighbor, to be a good boy, that one of my teachers in the school of religion at Belmont University brought this famous poem to class. I'll share the beginning and the end because there are probably several of you who may know it by heart.

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

Assuming that this Mary and Martha are the same ones with the brother Lazarus, we catch Martha on a better day that day, though stricken with grief and disappointment. In her fierce deaconing for herself and her family she runs out to meet Jesus and offers the deepest truth of her soul. She advocates for herself and in one of the tenderest moments in the bible, Jesus is moved to weep with her. Perhaps even because of this moment where she acted out of the truest sense of herself, not distracted, not anxious though there was plenty swirling around her to arrest her attention otherwise. Jesus is moved by her naked humanity. What a profound moment... the word made flesh recognizing another fleshly creature coming into full being in front of him.

The better portion that Jesus commends in Mary is like a game of hot potato. She happened to be holding it that day. She was able by pure intention, a confluence of circumstances, or sheer luck to be able to offer her real self to Jesus. On that day when Lazarus was dead as a doornail and stinking in the grave, she couldn't muster the courage. She stayed at home and could only echo her sister's indignant plea, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." But this day when Jesus is a guest in her home and she doesn't need to be in mourning any longer she offers the gift of her attention and presence. I've heard some people talk about a life of prayer really amounts to, "wasting time with God." I believe Mary was that type of person, the person who makes you feel better just by being there, and when they are with you, you know they are

really there and not thinking about something else. The ministry of presence it is sometimes called. That is who Mary really was and she was wasting time with Jesus this day.

So what are we to do when we are distracted, anxious and troubled by many things. I think that be the title of my autobiography someday, Distracted, anxious, and troubled by many things, the Charlie McClain story. But really, what do we do? Do we become self-righteous toward other people, demanding that they be pulled into the frenzy of our own disordered lives? Or do we compare ourselves to someone who seems like they always have it all figured out. If only we could be like them. I think the Gospel is trying to tell us today that we should listen and respond to Jesus who is alerting us to the opportunities we have to engage with the world arounds us in the most unfettered way possible. Jesus calls us not out of condemnation, but out of love away from those things which make us anxious, distracted and troubled.

When Jesus looks at you this morning, in the midst of a full and busy life, you are engaged in good things and good work, but there is a distraction that is keeping you from showing the world the most wonderful version of you. The true version of you created to be a beloved child of God. We don't have to burden ourselves trying to earn worthiness and love by trying so hard to be good little people running around saving the world as hard as we possibly can. When Jesus looks at you, recognizes you as one of his own, and says "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing" what might that be? And what would letting go of trying to earn it mean for you?