

Message: "Faith's Other Definition"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 10:38-42

³⁸Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But 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." ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

I've recently been enjoying the company of a particular individual - we've spent, over the course of the last couple of weeks, several accumulative hours together. We've had no discussions at all, we've gone no place particularly special, we've not shared meals together, not watched any television shows together, not taken any walks or hikes together, not done any identifiable work together. But our time together has been absolutely wonderful, consisting almost entirely of me staring at him and him mostly ignoring me. I am speaking about the time I have recently shared with my new grandson Samuel, who is all of eight months old.

I don't know if you know this, but there's not a whole lot you can do with an eight-month-old child. Of course, diapers need to be changed and bottles prepared, and play time requires one to exchange rattles and toys expeditiously to keep things interesting, but with no real conversation or mobility or cognizance on their part, one would think that time together would be tedious and boring to the extreme. Yet, as those who experience such moments in their lives, they well know that these moments are gold; this grandparenting gig is amazing, filled with such moments, of me just being with Samuel, and I find myself filled with wonder and joy at the new life developing before my eyes. Simply being with him is magical.

I wonder if this is the kind of thing Jesus is getting at in our scripture passage today, where Jesus is a guest in the home of Mary and Martha? Martha invites Jesus into her home and assumes the role of host; she gets busy with places to sit and things to eat and things to drink, but notices her sister Mary making no such effort - she is sitting with Jesus, doing nothing but listening to his words. She is being with Jesus more than doing something for Jesus. Incensed, Martha gets mad and asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her; Jesus, instead, praises Mary for her attention, and cautions Martha over being so distracted as to not realize what is going on, to not realize who is with them.

This famous passage has been most often associated with the dangers of being too busy or too distracted to appreciate or even recognize the presence of

God, as Martha was perhaps susceptible to. I have a feeling most of us here can relate to Martha's plight, for we are a congregation that has many Martha's, including your pastor - I, like many of you, have been accused of overworking, of not taking my days off regularly or leading too many committee meetings throughout the year.....some of which is true. But you may have heard my excuse or my reasoning, which I stand by, and it is this - it is sometimes OK to do a little too much if what you are doing feeds your soul and has a life-energizing return, which I do find is the case with so much of the work I am privileged to do as your pastor. And as a father. And as a husband. And as a grandfather. But it can, and does, get out of hand, especially when life becomes a bit unpredictable.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I were hit with something which ended all of our doing for several days - I wonder if you can guess what it was? Hint: it begins with the letter C, it is presently spiking in Missoula County, it came upon us two and a half years ago, and it made everything higgledy-piggledy. Yes, I am talking about my wife and I getting sick with Covid. It was an illness that stopped our doing almost completely - for several days, all we could do was sit and sneeze and cough and doctor a terrible headache and sore throat. We couldn't do much of anything - all we could do was simply exist. Or so it seemed.

I hate to say it, but some good things came out of being forced to stop doing, and to simply exist for a while. I slowed down; I prioritized; I thought about things I don't normally think about, such as immanent death (when I was feeling really bad) or empathizing with those who had much more difficult experiences with the disease; I prayed more often; I sat still more often; I paid greater attention to many of the smaller things in life often missed, things like many good conversations with my wife, things like simply watching our garden grow, things like enjoying a delicious bowl of soup brought by one of our church members, things like taking a silent inventory of all the blessings of my life, and lifting up a silent "thank you." There were a lot of things I felt that I needed to be doing, but simply couldn't - which taught me that there is a priority in existence that places being human before doing human.

Perhaps that is the take-away here, the reminder that Jesus is lifting up with Martha and Mary - that we are sacred beings before we are sacred doings. It is most often thought that Mary was in education mode, listening for wisdom and guidance and truth from Jesus as she sat at his feet. There is another possibility here which is just as likely, that Mary was rapt in her attention

because she found herself the object of God's loving attention and recognized the precious gift that was before her. How many are the souls out there who are desperate to know they matter unconditionally to another, that they matter at all to someone? How often is it the case that those same people have somehow missed the presence of a God who sees the value in each one of us, just as we are? How often does this world and its busy-ness distract and confuse us, keeping us blind to the grace afforded all? No wonder our world is so full of self-destruction and violence, the natural result where life has lost its sense of sacred value.

Elizabeth Myer Boulton is president and creative director of the SALT Project. I like how she puts the story of Martha and Mary in perspective; she says, "The story is not a celebration of study or inaction or even of sitting still. It's a celebration of savoring, of delighting in God, of creating the possibility of sabbath even on the busiest of days. By the same token, this story is not a critique of kitchen duty or the active life or just plain old getting things done. It's a critique of worry and distraction. It's a critique of being fragmented, of chasing after many things when there is only one thing.

There is only one thing - being with God; being with Jesus. There is only one thing, which leads to all life-worthy things. Mary has chosen that one thing in her longing for Jesus; but I have a feeling that Martha had done so as well, even as she may have lost sight of it for the moment. And I have a feeling that, after the dinner was over and Jesus had left their home, Mary joined Martha in cleaning up the mess. For being with Jesus cannot help but lead to a life of following Jesus, and service to others is a part of the package. But it starts with being, not doing; without knowing who we are, or more accurately, whose we are, we have no hope of knowing what's worth doing. Being with God leads to doing for God - and Jesus makes it clear that the order matters.