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First Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 10:38-42 (Mary and Martha)

### **“Mary and Martha”**

Do you have trouble relaxing? Are you a perfectionist? Are you uncomfortable without your cell phone? Do you bring your laptop with you on vacation? Do you consider multitasking a way of life?

A “yes” response to any of these questions could classify you as a Type A personality. And if you’re a Type A, the story of Mary and Martha probably rubs you the wrong way.

It rubs me the wrong way.

Imagine you’re Martha. Even if you’re not a type A, you’ve probably been Martha at some point in your life.

Martha is in the kitchen, getting ready for her dinner guests. She’s preparing the roast, mashing the potatoes, stringing the beans, husking the corn. She’s probably making her own pie crust and filling it with something tasty like cherries or peaches.

And before she started all the cooking she had to make sure her house was clean, too. She’s scrubbed it from top to bottom. She’s dusted, vacuumed, cleaned bathrooms, scrubbed floors, made beds, and put away toys. And Martha doesn’t take any short cuts; throwing everything into a closet and praying no one will see what’s in them is not what she does. No siree. She makes sure her home is clean.

And she wants her table to look nice, too. So she’s pulled out her best stuff. And you know when you pull out your best stuff it needs a little freshening up. Because, let’s face it, we only use the good stuff once a year. It gets a little dusty in the back of the cabinet. So it too needs to be

wiped down. And all that silver needs to be polished. And all those linens need to be ironed.

Getting ready for an honored guest like Jesus is no easy task! It takes a lot of work to prepare a meal for someone so special, even if the meal is only for 4 people. Because that's all Martha was expecting. She had to prepare dinner for herself, her sister Mary, her brother Lazarus (he's not in Luke's version of the story, but we can assume he's there since Jesus raised him from the dead and all), and Jesus. Four people; a nice intimate gathering. Martha's glad about this, because after she's done feeding everyone she'll get to really talk to Jesus.

So imagine Martha's surprise when there's a knock at the door and she opens it to find Jesus there with 12 men in tow!

Well, Martha has to completely rearrange her plans. And there's nothing more that a Type A hates than to rearrange plans. We are not "go with the flow" type of people. We're planners and executors. We do not go with the flow. We plan and execute.

How am I going to feed 16 people with a roast that serves 4? How am I going to divide 4 ears of corn into enough to feed 16? Imagine the measly amount of corn that you'd get. A little nub.

But, type As are not easily defeated. So Martha heads back into the kitchen and rummages through the freezer and pantry to see what she can dig up.

While she's doing this, she notices out of the corner of her eye that her sister Mary is sitting with the men in the living room. But, wait, she's not only sitting, she's sitting at Jesus' feet, looking up at him, and hanging on his every word.

What the . . .? So Martha, taking matters into her own hands-planning, executing-marches into that living room and says to Jesus (because clearly he is in charge of the situation here), "Hey I need a little help. Why don't you tell Mary to come on in here and give me a hand?"

Now, Martha's not out of line here. A little abrupt maybe, but a woman's place was, after all, in the home. Specifically, in the kitchen. Not as a student listening to the great rabbi. Everyone knows that.

Well, everyone apparently but Jesus, who says to her:

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things (no kidding). There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part."

You know, this story should really be called a miracle story, because it's a miracle that Martha didn't crucify Jesus right then and there.

You know, it would have been nice if Jesus had said,

"You're right Martha. Mary, on your feet. Go in there and help your sister. And what are you doing sitting there? Only disciples sit there, and you know that only men are allowed to be disciples."

But Jesus doesn't say that, because Jesus is enlightened.

He could have said, "You're right, Martha. Mary, let's the two of us go in there and help get dinner ready." After all, we know the real conversation happens in the kitchen. That's why we build such big kitchens these days. The three of them could have had a really good conversation while getting the dinner ready. And, as we know, many hands make light work.

But, Jesus doesn't say any of that. He tells Martha: "You are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Only one. And Mary has chosen the better part."

Now if you were here last week, you heard the story of the Good Samaritan. That story comes right before today's story. In that story the lawyer asks Jesus what he must do (**do**) to inherit eternal life. That's when Jesus tells him a little story about a man who falls into the ditch and needs help getting out of it; two people step over the man on their way to someplace else and completely ignore him. It's the Samaritan who reaches

down into the ditch and helps the man out of it. Who was the neighbor, Jesus asks? Well, that's easy. The Samaritan. Correct, Jesus says. Go and do likewise. Go and do. Type As, give yourself a pat on the back.

But then Jesus shows up at Martha's house for dinner. And he tells Martha that Mary, who sits at his feet, basking in his glory, hanging on his every word, being a good student, has chosen the better part.

And the type As begin to tense up.

So is the conflict here really between doing and contemplating, as so many have said? Is listening to the Word proclaimed better than putting the Word into action? Is the contemplative life really the better life?

Well the type As will be glad to hear that the answer is No. But . . . type As be warned. The problem with Martha is not that she is busy serving and providing hospitality. The problem with Martha is that she is worried and distracted and pulled in a million different directions. And when that happens it's hard to be attentive to the people who need us, it's hard to be attentive to our own needs, and thus it's hard to be faithful.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume that many of us can identify with Martha. Feeling pulled in different directions, feeling worried and distracted by many things — these seem to be common threads of life in our fast-paced world. And while it's true that much of our busyness and distraction stems from the noblest of intentions —

- Wanting to provide for our families,
- Wanting to give our children every opportunity to enrich their lives,
- Wanting to serve our neighbors,
- And yes, wanting to serve the Lord.

We must push back on the temptation to measure our worth by how busy we are, or by how much we accomplish, or by how well we meet the expectations of others. We need to wean ourselves from the addiction of productivity, because that addiction leads to burn-out, and when we're burned out, we're not useful to anyone and we can't do anything.

How do you know if you're burned out? Well, you might find yourself sniping at others – like Martha did to Mary.

You also might find yourself emotionally exhausted, and feel a type of fatigue that comes from carrying too much for too long.

Or maybe you're losing your sense of empathy and caring, or you have a decreased sense of accomplishment, or things feel useless, or you feel like nothing you do makes any difference. These are all signs of burn-out, and they can leave us emotionally, mentally, and spiritually spent.

Jesus may have sensed that Martha was burned out, and that's why he told her that Mary had chosen the better part. Now could he have told her that without comparing her to her sister? Probably; I wish he had. But Lord knows that a lot of us struggle with letting go, and giving ourselves permission to rest. We need to give ourselves a break, and times of peace and quiet and reflection and play. And we need to let go of the guilt we may feel to be the best at something, or to always be busy doing something, or to be the perfect version of ourselves. Contrary to what we may think, we don't need to earn our downtime, or times of pleasure and renewal.

Plus there are a lot of health benefits and great creativity that can arise from letting ourselves just be, not to mention spiritual benefits. It's no accident that God declared the Sabbath holy, making it one of the commandments. It's OK to stop and pause and rest in the arms of God. Indeed, it's more than OK. It's commanded.

Friends, the invitation Jesus makes to Martha — and I *do* take it as invitation rather than rebuke — is to stop and rest; to sit and be, if just for a little while. And this invitation is particularly poignant given where this scene takes place. Jesus, has “set his face for Jerusalem” (9:51) and is marching steadfastly toward his destiny. And yet as purposeful, even hurried, as his march toward the cross may seem at this point in the story, here he tarries, lingering in the presence of his friends and inviting them to do the same. Even amid the hustle and bustle of fulfilling one's mission, Jesus seems to say, there is still nothing more important than to live in the

“eternal now” and to soak in the pleasures and blessings of this day that God has given to you.

Luke’s story is left suspended. We don’t know what happened next — whether Mary and Martha were reconciled, whether they were all able to enjoy the meal that Martha had prepared, and whether Martha was finally able to sit and rest.

But we do know that Jesus invites all of us who are worried and distracted by many things to sit and rest in his presence, to hear his words of grace and truth, to know that we are loved and valued as children of God, to be renewed in faith and strengthened for service, and to hear that our worth is not measured by how much we do, or how busy we are or aren’t. Instead, our worth is proclaimed at our baptisms – you are a child of God, loved forever.

So today Jesus calls us to stop. Stop what we’re doing, stop our worrying, and rest.

This is not chastising. This is relief. This is good news. It doesn’t matter if you’re male or female, old or young, single or married, have children or not. This story is for you.

And so Martha, dear Martha, there is relief and rest for even you.

Amen.