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First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 10:38-42

God, for everything there is a time, and time is now our most precious commodity. Our clocks are always running. From birth to death: during times of joy and sorrow: work and play: business and pleasure: speech and silence: worship and church activities: tick, tock, tick, tock.

We are like Martha, with our long to-do lists. Slow us down Lord, and for now simply remind us that only one thing is needful, that we be still before you and know that you are God. Amen.

“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

Two weeks ago I began a short sermon series on your four favorite hymns: Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee; Great Is Thy Faithfulness; Be Thou My Vision; and How Great Thou Art. These were your top 4 hymns in the March Madness bracket.

Today our hymn is “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”, a brilliant hymn of praise that can be sung throughout the year. Set to Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” from the final movement of his 9th symphony, the hymn is a crowd pleaser.

The text was written by Henry Van Dyke, a Presbyterian, who was recognized as one of the great preachers of his generation. It was written while he was spending time at Williams College located in Williamstown, Massachusetts. It’s said that one morning van Dyke handed the manuscript to the college president, saying “Here is a hymn for you. Your mountains (the Berkshires) were my inspiration.” The words convey the great joy that overflows in us when we experience the beauty of creation, or reflect on all God has done for us and through us, or consider the joy God experiences in us. Simply put, the hymn is considered one of the most joyous expressions of hymn lyrics in the English language.

So as we sing this hymn, it’s worth pausing to remember what we all know all too well: that too many of us rush through life too quickly and so fail to experience that joy. We allow the phone calls we have to make, the laundry we need to fold, the paper we need to write, the porch we need to fix, the stuff we have to do --

get in the way of simply stopping, looking around, and being filled with joy and gratitude at the world God has given us.

Which leads me to Martha, who is the epitome of someone who is unable to stop, pause, slow down and simply experience the joy and beauty of the one precious life that God has given her.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and hazard a guess that there are many Marthas here today. I'm not ashamed to admit that I am a Martha. As a FT working mom of four children, I am very in touch with my inner Martha. She and I are best friends. She was a huge help to me when I had 3 kids under the age of 5 and a congregation to care for; and she is my constant companion today as I manage the complexity of ministry here.

Maybe she's your inner companion, too, as you navigate your to-do list and work requirements and family demands and volunteer obligations. And by the way, Martha isn't only for women; plenty of men know her, too. And let's be honest since we're among friends, shall we? We also know Mary. *All of us know a Mary.* Anyone who has ever been the only one on a team actually following instructions or completing the group project understands Martha and knows Mary. Anyone who has ever had a job where they had to take up the slack left by someone else's questionable work ethic understands Martha and knows Mary. Anyone who has ever been the volunteer who dutifully shows up to help only to find the others have all slacked off or shown up late, knows Martha and is just a wee bit irritated by Mary.

Martha is just the sort of person Jesus prayed for a few verses earlier when he said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

But in this story Jesus sends the opposite message. Mary is the star pupil here while Martha, the only one who seems to be concerned about getting the job done, gets what is almost a rebuke from Jesus for all her hard work.

"Martha, 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 friends, before I say anything else please note that Jesus is not telling Martha that a life of learning is better than a life of serving; Jesus is not telling Martha

that a life of contemplation is better than one of hospitality. This is not a contest about who is the better and more faithful disciple. We do an injustice to the story when we reduce it to a spat between two women about who will get dinner on the table. After all, something about this experience must have been important enough to the early church for Luke to have included it in his Gospel. And what could that be? Well, I don't think Jesus is reprimanding the Busy Martha, he's reprimanding the Worried and Anxious Martha.

Did you know that the root meaning of the word "worry" is "strangle" or "seize by the throat and tear"? Or that the root meaning of the word "distraction" is "a separation or a dragging apart of something that should be whole"? These are violent words. Words that wound and fracture. States of mind that render us incoherent and divided.

Jesus found Martha in just such a state of fragmentation — a condition in which she could not enjoy his company, savor his presence, find inspiration in her work, receive anything he wished to offer her, or show him genuine love. Instead, all she could do was question his love ("Lord, do you not care?"), fixate on herself ("*My sister has left me to do all the work by myself*") and triangulate ("Tell her then to help me.")

Does any of this sound familiar? Is your worry keeping you from being fully present, fully engaged, fully alive? Has your busyness become an affront to the people you long to host? Is your inner life so fragmented, so strangled, so incoherent, that you struggle to give and receive love? Are you quick to seethe?

If your answer to some of these questions is yes . . . and by the way, I think all of us go through periods of time when our answer is yes . . . perhaps you should try to hear Jesus's words to Martha not as a criticism, but as an invitation. An invitation to stop putting these ridiculous expectations on yourself or others and instead pause, reflect and consider the joy, the great joy and privilege it is, to sit and delight in God's love.

You see, here's the thing. All the Gospels talk about the big love that God has for the world, a love so big that it propels Jesus to Jerusalem; a love so big that it moves him to lay down his life for friends and enemies alike. Yet what kind of big love would it actually be if the one demonstrating it had been so focused on getting to Jerusalem that he failed to notice anyone along the way? It might be

like a host who didn't spend any time with their guests because they were so busy and anxious about serving them.

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.

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. This is not chastising. This is a 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, may you take the time to pause from your busyness in order to simply bask in the joy that God wants you to feel so that this prayer may become fuel for life:

*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee
God of glory, Lord of love
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee
Op'ning to the Sun above
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness
drive the dark of doubt away
Giver of immortal gladness
fill us with the light of day*

Amen.