

Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

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Luke 10:38-42

“Being Martha, Being Mary”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

“Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village,
where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

She had a sister named Mary, who sat the Lord’s feet
and listened to what he was saying.”

Welcome to the well-known, somewhat controversial, and always interesting story of Martha and Mary. Now, do you remember who these two women are? Martha and Mary are sisters, their brother is Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead. They are Jesus’ close friends. In fact, theologian William Willimon calls Martha and Mary “Jesus’ best friends.” Their home was considered to be Jesus’ home away from home. Martha and Mary are like sisters to Jesus.

So Jesus goes to visit his dear friends Martha and Mary and they welcome him to their home. And then Martha starts to fuss, she gets busy making Jesus and his companions a meal—she is industrious, doing what needs to be done to offer these beloved guests proper hospitality. But not Mary. Mary perches herself at Jesus’ feet, the posture of a student or a devoted follower, and listens to Jesus speak.

Martha is busy, rattling those pots and pans, working hard, engaged in the many tasks in the kitchen and in the house required to put on a big meal for her guests. But Mary just sits, listens and does not help. After a while Martha gets irritated that she is doing all the work and she complains to Jesus about her sister’s behavior. Look how busy I am! I am working so hard and Mary is just sitting there listening to you and not helping me with my “many tasks.”

Jesus says, Martha, Martha you are worried, busy and distracted. Mary has chosen the “better part.” The King James Version says, “Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her.”

The Martha and Mary story is an important one in the New Testament. Do not be tempted to diminish its significance because of its diminutive size. It is a brief story, just a few lines in the Book of Luke and the only instance when Martha and Mary are mentioned in Luke, but it invites a discussion about the place of contemplation and action in our lives.

Over time, Martha has come to symbolize doing, action, busy-ness, even fussiness. She is organized and devoted to service.

Mary has come to symbolize contemplation, quiet, study, reflection.

She is attentive, pensive, listening.

Martha is making a meal, offering hospitality, doing her “many tasks.”

Mary is seated in the posture of a student, at Jesus’ feet, drinking in his wisdom.

Now here we are with the Martha and Mary text the Sunday that we are re-united after one full month apart. It offers us the opportunity to look at how we spent our time apart...how did you spend your July?

Were there times of busy-ness, action, service, DOING?

Were there times of contemplation, reflection, study, BEING?

The Martha/Mary story is a great lens through which we can analyze how we use our time. When I think about the Martha and Mary story and how I spent MY July, I realize that what happened this past month is not what I anticipated.

As many of you know, I went on a bicycle touring trip for a good part of July....much of it a solo experience.

I drove with Michael to Prince Edward Island in Canada and jumped on my bike on the eastern end of the island. I then cycled through PEI, into and through New Brunswick, crossed into the USA, and then went down the coast of Maine, crossed into New Hampshire, then dropped into Central Massachusetts, went down the eastern shore of the Quabbin and home on Route 9 from Ware.

What I *imagined* for myself when I planned this trip, trained for this trip, and left for this trip was a very welcome and needed Mary experience.

However, when I actually did the bike trip, that is not what happened at all.

I imagined a quiet, solo experience cycling through rolling hills with sunny skies and beautiful views. I imagined long periods of quiet—just pedaling while I thought about life and then stopping for little picnics on idyllic rock outcroppings in picturesque coves. I imagined the roads in Canada would be much like the roads in Western Mass where I had been training....pretty, winding, rural, safe, and FLAT. And I did not imagine wind.

I imagined a Mary trip, but I got a Martha trip instead.

I was much BUSIER every day on the bike trip than I ever expected. Once Michael left for home on day #5, I was mainly alone and I was mainly lost. I had to stop and study the map constantly and ask people, “Is this Route 111? Oh, where is Route 111?”

“Excuse me, have I passed the turn-off for 32A? Oh, how far back is that turn-off?”

I also had to buy newspapers daily and study the weather and get up earlier and earlier to avoid afternoon downpours, which I never seemed to avoid.

I had to make a point of talking to local people about the route I had chosen for the next day to see if the road on the map was a good one for biking....

“Oh, that short-cut to Ellsworth has a three-mile hill?”

I also had to organize where and when I would find food and water...I could not carry enough of either for a full day’s ride so I had to calculate at what intervals I would find rest stops where I could eat and drink.

During the whole bike trip, I had to be really on my toes, planning, organizing and making adjustments constantly.

I imagined a Mary experience and got a Martha one instead.

And yet I am not sorry.

I learned a lot during my less-fun, more Martha trip. I learned about self-reliance and meeting a challenge, I learned about **doing** day after day after day, pushing my limits, I learned about facing hard times and pulling through.

It was a less fun, less idyllic experience but very valuable nonetheless. I am glad I did it, even with all its Martha moments...maybe especially because of all the Martha moments.

But it also meant that when I returned from the bike trip in mid-July, I had to build in some Mary time to BALANCE (and THAT is the key word) to balance out my summer. I had to sit and read the book Annie Turner sent me, Tattoos on the Heart, and ponder its meaning for my life and ministry. I had to pick up my slim volume of daily devotionals and meditate on those messages each day. I had to slow down and re-group and walk by the Oxbow near my home and talk to God. No longer worried about my route, my food and the weather pattern for the day, I could focus on a more inward dialogue and ponder and pray.

The Martha/Mary story is often used as an illustration of how busy-ness ruins our lives and crowds out contemplation. The lesson in this story in Luke is often presented as: Martha is mis-guided, Mary is right.

While preparing this sermon, I went to the fat Commentaries on my shelf in my study at home and read analysis after analysis that reinforced this point of view. Martha should see that she is too busy DOING and should value just BEING. Bad Martha. Mary chose to listen, to BE with Jesus, to study, think and grow. Good Mary.

Eugene Peterson, the revered theologian who wrote THE MESSAGE (among many other works) even went so far to say that the busy-ness that we all experience (that Martha demonstrates) is rooted in two things: vanity and laziness. Peterson says we are vain and we want to feel important so we make ourselves overly busy to shore up our feelings of self-worth. AND he says we are lazy and do not do the work of discerning which tasks are important and should be tackled and which should be refused, so we make ourselves overly busy by not prioritizing our work and never saying no.

I don't agree with Peterson. I don't agree with the commentators who demonized busy-ness and glorified contemplation. I don't think contemplation and action are polar opposites, I think BOTH are needed for a meaningful life. Contemplation is good and must be part of our lives, and contemplation IS often short-changed. But action is good too, for it is through doing and service that we shape who we are and we give back to the world. Both contemplation and action are needed, one does not, in my mind, trump the other. Busy-ness should not be demonized and contemplation glorified—they are both necessary. **The key is balance.** Don't privilege one over the other—include both, balance both, for a life filled with meaning.

I disagree with Peterson and agree instead with Pastor and Teacher Fred Craddock who said this about the Martha and Mary story. ..Craddock was asked, "Pastor, should we be more like Martha or more like Mary?" And Craddock answered, "Yes."

Jesus' own life reflects that "YES." He was busy and active, teaching, preaching, healing, DOING, AND he would also slip away often for times of prayer and quiet—at least he tried. Jesus' parables and the illustrations he used in his preaching often lift up the power and necessity of service, of caring for others, of doing what needs to be done to create the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

Remember: just before the Martha/Mary story in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in which the Samaritan is commended for his ACTION on behalf of the needs of another (Luke 10:29-37).

And we recognize that if Martha had not busied herself preparing a meal for Jesus and his companions there would have been no dinner. Jesus and his followers were totally dependent on the hospitality of others—they had no home, no income, no place to stay or eat as they wandered. Martha’s labor made their traveling ministry possible.

So why does Jesus seem to rebuke Martha for being so busy and praise Mary for her choice to sit and listen at his feet?

The Bible says that when Martha complained to Jesus that Mary was not helping her with her many tasks, Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things...Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

As I said earlier, the King James version translates “Mary has chosen the better part” as “Mary has chosen the good part...” and that translation is more accurate if one returns to the original Greek. This is subtle but Jesus may not be saying, “Mary chose the good part and you Martha the bad...” He may be saying, Mary chose the good part for her, you chose to show me and my friends warm hospitality and that distracted you but that is good also. Jesus may be suggesting that both Martha and Mary are doing their parts—together they reflect the life of a disciple. Mary, listening to every word Jesus is saying, is playing her part. It is a role that is different from that of Martha, but it is a good role for someone to play. Martha is busy doing good things, showing hospitality which is welcome and needed and that too is a necessary part of discipleship.

Jesus seems to bless Mary for sitting and listening to him. But remember, for so much of the Gospels, Jesus calls people to get up, to follow him, to stay awake, to walk with him, to give a cup of cold water in his name, to clothe the naked, to reach out to those in need, to go, to do, to heal, to work, to act.

In this story, Jesus seems to bless Mary which may balance his otherwise repeated urgings to do, to serve, to work, to act. Following Jesus is a demanding task. It takes energy, resourcefulness and lots of bold, hard work. AND sometimes it means simply being with him, listening to him, enjoying him.

Jesus loved Martha and Mary and in his own ways, we read in the four Gospels, he blessed them both.

Busy-ness, DOING in the service of God is a good thing, something Martha models and Jesus calls us to do over and over again.

And quiet BEING conversing with God is also a good thing, something Mary models and Jesus calls us to do over and over again.

If asked, should we be more like Martha or more like Mary? I would echo Fred Craddock, and say YES.

And today, as we reflect on the story of Martha and Mary, I would ask YOU, how was YOUR July?

And what are your plans for August?

Amen.

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