

Called to be both *Mary and Martha*

Luke 10:38-42

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor Peter Hanson

Christ the King, New Brighton

July 17, 2016

So, who are you more like—Mary or Martha? That is the question that, for generations women in the church have been asked. Are you a Mary or a Martha? That has been the take away of many a sermon on this text, many a women's bible study over the years. Are you more like Mary or more like Martha?

My grandmother used to hate that question. She did not like that women in the church had to somehow CHOOSE between these two characters, as if these were the only two options available to them, to either be a Mary, the studious type, the one who sat and listened and learned, or a Martha, one who was a doer, a worker, a contributor. My grandmother used to hate that distinction that was drawn for women—especially for women in the church.

Did I mention that my grandmother's name was Martha? And as a churchgoer her entire life, as a committed Christian person, a faithful and fervent Lutheran all of her 90 plus years, she probably heard more than her fair share of Mary-Martha dichotomies posed in her presence; she probably had that question posed directly to her way too many times.

She was a doer—a pianist and organist, a church choir director for years and years and years, she more than pulled her weight over the years as a pastor's wife in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, 60s and well into the 70s, she more than provided her share of meals, desserts, coffee, hospitality to parsonage visitors (announced and unannounced) over the years. Yet, she used to cringe when someone would point out the obvious about her name, awkwardly offering that back-handed sort of compliment by saying "What a Martha" she was, what a great Martha she was.

Because, you see, she was also quite a scholar. Again—ahead of her time. She went to Augsburg College earning her BA in just a few short years. After marrying my Grandpa and accompanying him to his first parish in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, she not only played the more typical roles of pastor's wife, chief hostess and first lady of the congregation, she also worked very closely with my grandfather as he completed his second master's degree, serving not only as his typist, but also his librarian, editor, and at times ghost writer as he

completed his dissertation and also wrote several articles and even a theological book from that tiny, remote, 3-point parish. She read with him and even ahead of him as he completed this advanced correspondence course, figuratively sitting at the feet of Moses and Jesus and the Apostle Paul, of Augustine and Luther and Kirkegaard and Gruntvig. She was as much a Mary, despite the fact that her name was Martha. And she hated when people pointed that out—when they seemed to suggest that you had to be one or the other, that a woman in the church had to chose to play one role or the other.

Let's take a look at the story again. Jesus comes to the home of these two sisters, Martha and Mary. Mary sits at Jesus' feet to listen to him teach, to learn from him, while Martha, we're told, was multi-tasking. We're not told exactly what she was doing, we assume that she was preparing a meal, which is a reasonable assumption, but not actually one that appears in the text. Maybe she was trying to listen and learn from Jesus, too, but was simply distracted by things she thought she had to do around the house, to be a good hostess to this guest. Which, of course, is a laudable thing—to want to make sure that your guest is well taken care of, well provided for. Hospitality is not simply a polite gesture, it is a biblical value, one held up and illustrated in our first lesson today, as well as so many other places in both the Old and New Testaments. So I don't think that Jesus was specifically rebuking Martha for her *hospitality*. He was not saying that she shouldn't be concerned with that. Nor do I think that he's saying something like "why can't you be more like Mary," pitting the two sisters against each other in some sort of sibling rivalry triangulation—in fact, he seem to be actively avoiding getting caught in the middle of all that. No, I think his words are actually more of an invitation for her to take a look at her own life. He is calling her to reevaluate the many things she's doing and to put them into their proper perspective.

"Martha," Jesus says, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." The key words here, it seems to me are worried, distracted and many. Martha is multitasking. She trying to do too much. She's doing so much that she's not able to really focusing on doing one thing well. We can relate, can't we? It seems that our society is simply cut out for multitasking. Smart phones and tablets are advertised as being able to help us to more and more things at the same time—without dropping the ball, one recent

ad says. One of the reasons fewer people drive a stick shift these days is simply because they want or need that other hand free to do something else—fiddle with the radio, catch up on phone calls, or even eat their lunch at the dashboard diner.

There is a lot of pressure for us to multitask. In our culture of hectic schedules and the relentless pursuit of productivity, we are tempted to measure how much our lives matter by how busy we are, by how much we accomplish, or by how well we meet the expectations of others. And it's not just individuals, is it? Congregations like ours, too, can easily be pulled in different directions, feeling worried and distracted by many things. We try so hard to be all things to all people, so that everybody can feel at home and find their place and have their preferences honored and their needs met. We worry about keeping up with the church next door, of providing everything *they* provide so that we can “compete” and keep our “market share.” We want to believe Jesus' words when he tells us that worrying won't add a single hour to our life and yet we cannot seem to quell our anxious thoughts and frantic activity. And it is to us, as much as to Martha, that Jesus invites a new perspective. It is to us that Jesus says, you are worried and distracted by so many things; there is need of only one thing.”

Finding that one thing, that one needful thing is one of the spiritual pursuits we're called to carry out, one of the faith practices we're called to undertake. It's something we've been trying to focus on as leaders at CtK, establishing priorities, our most essential ministries as a congregation. Put a different and admittedly more jarring way, if this congregation, God forbid, were to suddenly cease to exist, what one thing, or what handful of things would the larger community miss *most* about it? Because we can be so worried, so distracted about so many things. We can try to do things right—to keep up with the Joneses and with the various different expressions of the church out there, so much so that we forget what is unique, what is special, what is NEEDFUL about our existence as a community of faith.

It is true that much of our busyness and distraction stems from the noblest of intentions. We want to serve our neighbors, and yes, we want to serve the Lord. Indeed, where would the church be without all of our “Marthas,” those faithful folk who perform the tasks of hospitality and service so vital to making the church a welcoming and well-functioning community? But in all that busyness, we can and we do get distracted. We can and we do

start worrying about what we're doing, how much we're doing, about what we're not doing, or God forbid, worrying that we're not doing it right, not doing it like we used to, not doing it like those other churches are, we worry so much that we can end up getting so distracted that we think this is all about us, and what we're doing and we forget WHY we're doing this any of this work in the first place.

See, I still think we're called to be like Martha, to provide hospitality, to make sure that in the midst of our privilege, in the midst of our insider status we still are making sure that others have place at the table, that there is always room for more people. But we're also called to be like Mary. To listen deeply to God and to one another, to seek in the other God's transformation. To move beyond our own self-important doing all the time to deeply listening to one another. We are called to take a deep look at ourselves, though, and to discern whether we are committing ourselves to that one needful thing. We are called as a congregation to constantly be reminded of that one thing, that one true thing, that one needful thing to which we are called.

We are called to constantly reconsider whether we are placing our hope and our trust in our own actions—or our own history, identity or whatever—or whether we are putting our hope in the presence of God among us, made known to us in Jesus Christ, made available to us in the on-going work of the Holy Spirit. As we provide hospitality, as we seek to serve one another and provide space at the table for those not yet here, let us also commit ourselves to listen deeply to one another. Let us continually seek out that better part, that one, true and needful thing will not be taken away from us. AMEN.