

“What are your gifts?”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, July 21, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But 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.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are **worried and distracted** by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”
Luke 10:38-42

Will you pray with me. Calming God, bringer of quiet wisdom, yet director of our active lives, relieve us of our worries for just a few moments and walk us right past our distractions by many things so we might hear you in the stillness of this very warm holy summer morning. Amen.

Can anybody tell me what the letters “a-d-d” stand for? (get responses)
“Attention deficit disorder” – a modern term, one that wasn’t in use while I was growing up, that means an inability to focus and stay on task, to become distracted easily, to be hyperactive. There are tests one can take to determine if they are “add.” I’ve read a few of them and discovered I probably have at least half of the symptoms of “add.” Who knew? I just thought I was a little scattered in my thoughts and actions – and my inability to finish very many tasks was not something that had a label or a diagnosis, it’s just the way I was, and still am.

The fact is – it seems to me – we live in an “add society” in which there are so many things to distract us, so many things to get done, so many things to worry about, so many divisions in our daily schedules, it’s a wonder we ever get anything done to completion, or to anyone’s satisfaction. One professional in technology “has written that the disease of the Internet age is ‘continuous partial attention.’”¹

My newly found identification with “add” has caused me to read the story of Martha and Mary with new understanding and appreciation. I think Martha was “add.” Instead of hearing Jesus say to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things...” (Lk 10:41), I think he could just as easily have said, in our day, “Martha, Martha, I have a little test I want you to take. I believe you have ‘add.’” And in the next breath, today he would say, “There is a drug we can give you to calm you down.” All the while, Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet, taking in every word, but perhaps without a clue as to what he is talking about.

We tend to like labels, though, don’t we? We identify with them, even if they’re not always true. I’ve heard people, women usually, say, “Oh, I’m a ‘Martha.’ Always

¹Linda Stone, quoted by James A. Wallace in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 267.

busy. Always out in the kitchen or trying to finish some important task.” Or, “I wish I could be a ‘Mary.’” Or, “Boy, *she*’s a ‘Mary.’ Never around when it’s time to do the dishes.”

Casting the jokes and labels aside, though, there is an important lesson to be learned in Martha and Mary’s home and Jesus knows it. Luke knows it, so he’s the only one of the four Gospel writers who tells the story. It’s also a story Luke tells right after he relays Jesus’ telling the parable of the Good Samaritan we heard last week. In that story Jesus answers the lawyer’s question about what he can do to obtain eternal life by telling him to live a life like the one who showed mercy upon another person, even one unlike himself. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus tells the lawyer. (Lk 10:37)

And yet in our story for this morning, Jesus says to busy, distracted, worried, add-prone Martha, “Martha, Martha, sit down, catch your breath, watch your sister Mary, and listen. Just listen.”

Which is it? Are we to “go and do, relieving the miseries of the world along the way,” or “sit and listen to the Lord”? Back to back stories with two different directives coming from the lips of Jesus.

Fred Craddock, one of my very favorite preachers, writes of the story of Martha and Mary, “We must not cartoon the scene: Martha to her eyeballs in soapsuds, Mary pensively on a stool in the den, and Jesus giving scriptural warrant for letting dishes pile high in the sink. If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be Yes.”²

Yes, we are to go and do, and yes, we are to listen and reflect. Where, when and how we do each makes up the spiritual life, the life of holy activity and rest that Jesus himself demonstrates over and over again in the Gospel stories. First he would heal, then he would go pray. Then he would preach, then he would go pray. Then he would do a miracle, then he would go pray. Then he would upset the status quo applecart, then he would go pray. Caring in action *and* contemplation in quiet are both part of the “good spiritual life.”

I love it that Jesus doesn’t chastise Martha in this story. He doesn’t tell her she’s been bad or that she’s done something wrong. He speaks to her as I believe one of you would speak to me, “Susan, Susan, slow down. You’ve got yourself all worked up in a frenzy of add. Take a break.” And then, even though the NRSV translation makes it sound like Jesus is suggesting that Mary has done what is right – the NRSV translation reads, “Mary has chosen the *better* part...” (Lk 10:42) -- the King James translation reads, “Mary has chosen *that good* part...” The latter is probably the more appropriate translation. It’s not that Martha’s part isn’t good, it’s that Mary’s part is good, too. Yes, we need to go and do, but we also need to sit and listen.

²Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 152.

An observation that isn't often made about this story of Martha and Mary serving Jesus is this -- who invites Jesus into the house? It's busy Martha, not reflective Mary. The text reads, "Now as they went on their way, he [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home." (Lk 10:38)

If Martha hadn't invited Jesus in, would Mary have sought him out so she could sit at his feet and listen to him? We'll never know.

Balance in life is a wonderful thing. The challenge is learning how to achieve it – how to know when it's best to be active, to work on yard sales and visiting and helping others, and then when it's best to reflect on it all and discover its deeper meaning, as Jesus would have us understand that meaning. God calls us to action *and* to reflection, not the latest label like “add” and the newest drug to help us with our problem of hyperactivity.

Theologian Douglas John Hall describes this challenge well, “The struggle between word and deed, the speaker and the doer, the contemplative and the activist, will no doubt be with us until the end of time; and the complaint of the one about the other will undoubtedly recur in the future as frequently as it has in the past... Activism without contemplation ends in aimless ‘doing’ that usually aggravates existing difficulties.... On the other hand, only the unthinking could fail to recognize the myriad ways in which thought – including very serious biblical, theological, and other scholarship – regularly serves the duplicitous purposes of those who, their rhetoric notwithstanding, simply do not wish to ‘get involved.’”³

There is the challenge for us – to “get involved,” to stay engaged with all the difficulties and tragedies of life and at the same time to stay focused on a deep and energizing relationship with the Holy. In the end, the sacred story in which each one of us is a player needs *all* its good parts. That story needs all *our* gifts! Would you have invited Jesus into your home? ADD Martha did.

Let the people say, “Amen.”

³Douglas John Hall, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 264.